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AVR750 rated, p18

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that will blow
you clean away..."

ROBOT WARS

Pacific Rim is
preparing for
battle on
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ON TEST

JVC projector
LG Blu-ray/PVR
Philips 5.1/
soundbar
system
Yamaha AVR



Get Smart

We discover who makes the cleverest TV

Soundbar roundup

Give your flatscreen an audio boost

EISA
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Inside EISA AWARDS 2013–2014: WE CELEBRATE
THE VERY BEST IN HOME CINEMA HARDWARE, p111

■ GI JOE: RETALIATION
■ OLYMPUS HAS FALLEN
■ EVIL DEAD ■ ENTER THE
DRAGON ■ & MORE!

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10

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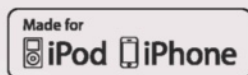
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Circulations



Smart system
showdown, p57

WELCOME

This issue we're taking a look at the Smart TV platforms offered by the major manufacturers, and the results are interesting. Firstly, it's clear that the concept of what a Smart TV should actually do is a little muddled, with some brands focusing entirely on catch-up TV, with others proffering customisation or voice control as a USP. There's no set template, which makes judging them a little complex – turn to p57 to see the results.



More importantly, it's becoming harder to evaluate Smart TV platforms as they are regularly being refined – **LG announced an exclusive deal with Sky's Now TV service** just as we were drawing our conclusions, so it was back to the drawing board. The interfaces offered by the big brands will no doubt change at next year's CES tech show, but don't be surprised if they are tweaked even before then. I guess that's what makes them Smart...

Mark Craven
Editor



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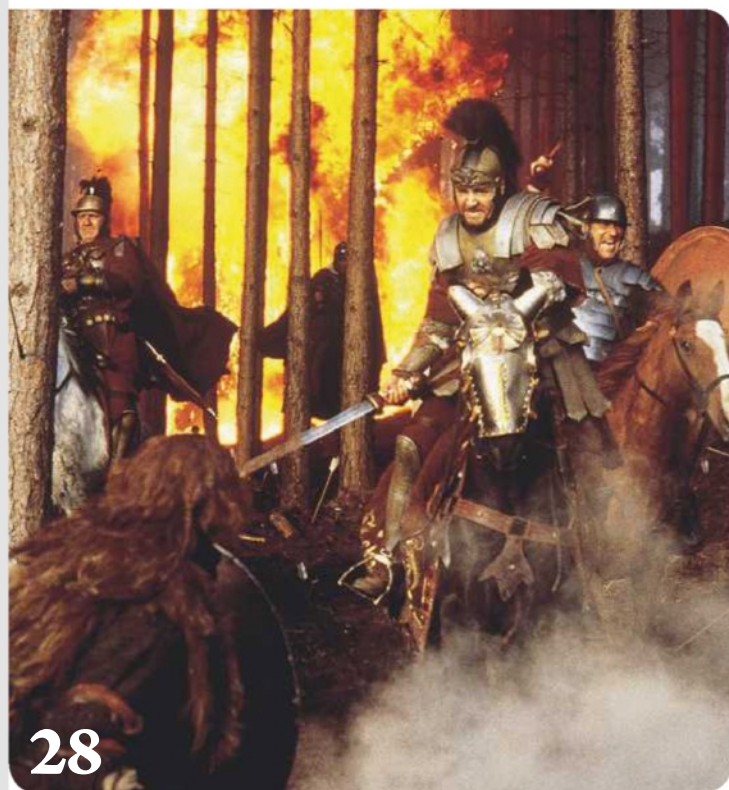
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MENU



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Plein Soleil
Nowhere

ROCK STEADY...



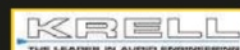
Since its inception, home theatre has presented tasks to high-end audio designers that challenge them in ways not seen before in a two-channel, analogue milieu. Digital surround sound processing directly confronted traditionalist music lovers, too, who felt that it compromised the purity of true high-end performance.

The wizards at Krell responded with a "clean sheet" approach, by delivering home theatre control centres to satisfy all purist criteria. The Foundation 7.1-Channel AV Processor is the latest in that long line, offering everything needed to master today's myriad viewing formats – from Blu-ray to 3D pass-through to TVs with built-in streaming – while maintaining Krell's exacting standards for analogue audio reproduction.



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BULLETIN

→ **NEWS HIGHLIGHTS** BOWERS & WILKINS Flagship CM Series loudspeaker takes its tweeter to new heights **KALEIDESCAPE** Affordable Blu-ray movie server revealed **CORNFLAKE** Smart App-artment offers a glimpse into the future **THE HORROR SHOW** UK VOD service run by genre fans for genre fans **PACIFIC RIM** Filmmaker spills the beans on his Blu-ray monster mash **AND MUCH MORE!**

4K screen heroes

Samsung UE65F9000 & UE55F9000
→ www.samsung.com/uk

SHOCK AND AWE

G.I. Joe: Retaliation blasts its way onto Blu-ray p96

If Samsung's first foray into the world of Ultra HD TV – the £35,000 85in UE85S9 – is beyond your budget, there's no need to worry. The company recently added 65in and 55in models to its UK lineup of 4K TVs, complete with rather more wallet-friendly price-tags. As well as the expected Smart functions, the UE65F9000 (£6,000) and UE55F9000 (£4,000) also boast Samsung's Quadmatic Picture Engine, Quad Core processing and Precision Black/Micro Dimming LED technology.

HCC ONLINE...

Looking for breaking AV news, blogs, features, & reviews? For your daily fix visit us at www.homecinemachoice.com Follow us on Twitter @hccmag

Top of the pops

Bowers & Wilkins CM10 → www.bowers-wilkins.co.uk

Bowers & Wilkins has introduced a new loudspeaker in its CM Series line-up. Priced £3,000 per pair, the floorstanding CM10 'plays louder and has a more extended bass, better imaging and lower distortion' than the previous CM9 according to the manufacturer. It's also the first CM model to utilise the tweeter-on-top configuration that has become the hallmark of the brand's high-spec 800 Series Diamond offering. The tweeter itself is also another first for the range, boasting a new 'double-dome' design to stiffen the structure and aid imaging.



As well as Black Gloss, the CM10 is also available in a choice of Wengé and Rosenut real wood veneers and a Satin White painted finish

Aventage quartet



Yamaha has given its Aventage AV receiver range a boost in the UK with

the release of four models. The new lineup consists of the 7.2-channel RX-A830 (£900) and RX-A1030 (£1,000), the 9.2-channel RX-A2030 (£1,500) and the 11.2-channel RX-A3030 (£2,000). The company says that it's redesigned the internal layout of the four new models, altering the circuits to help eliminate sound degradation. In addition, the RX-A3030 boasts Yamaha Original Video Processing with 4K upscaling. uk.yamaha.com

Blu-ray on a budget



We've always been rather fond of

Pioneer's £150 BDP-150 budget Blu-ray player – which explains why we were excited to learn that the company has released its replacement. The £130 BDP-160 features Wi-Fi Direct and DLNA 1.5, as well as support for the new Pioneer ControlApp and iControlAV2013 apps for iOS and Android mobile devices. In addition to Blu-rays and DVDs, the BDP-160 also spins SACDs and can play FLV, MPEG, AVI, WMV, FLAC, WMA, MP3, MKV and DivX+ HD files. www.pioneer.co.uk

On-the-rack AVR



Tascam has introduced two new professional networking AV receivers. The £880

THX Select2 Plus-certified PA-R200 (pictured) and £600 PA-R100 are both rack-mountable and offer 4K upscaling via Marvell's Qdeo processing technology. Both models boast Audyssey 2EQ, Dynamic EQ and Dynamic Volume, while the PA-R200 adds Audyssey DSX tech. The flagship model also allows users to select between surround playback and distributed audio playback for up to three zones, powered or via pre outputs. www.tascam.co.uk

Cinema One player hits UK

Kaleidescape introduces its most affordable movie server to date

Kaleidescape, doyen of custom installers thanks to its Premiere movie server, has unveiled a (relatively) affordable, living-room friendly 4TB server and player capable of storing around 100 Blu-ray discs or 600 DVDs. The Kaleidescape Cinema One, which is priced at £3,295 and is available from retail shops, simply connects by HDMI to a screen or AVR and by Ethernet to an online connection.

Once a disc is imported, the Kaleidescape Cinema One offers instantaneous playback from the first frame of a title, provides extensive synopsis and scene information and allows users to construct playlists of favourite scenes from various titles.

The caveat is that licensing rules mean it can't play a Blu-ray import unless the disc is physically present in the machine (DVDs and CDs are not subject to the same requirement). Users could purchase a Kaleidescape Disc Vault, which stores the discs and negates the need to insert each title on playback – however, it adds significantly to the cost.

Kaleidescape founder and chief operating officer Cheena Srinivasan told us that the Blu-ray playback requirement is intolerable. 'It must change,' he stated emphatically.

Another solution is for users to download a Blu-ray quality version of the movie from the online Kaleidescape Store. Srinivasan is considering allowing users who own a Blu-ray to purchase a high-quality download for just £2 or £3, which would negate the need to insert the disc at playback. It would also give them an Ultraviolet copy stored in the cloud for viewing elsewhere.



Cheena Srinivasan: 'We're betting the farm on online being the future – but without sacrificing quality'

At present the store only contains Warner Home Video titles but Srinivasan assured us that other deals are in the pipeline. 'We're betting the farm on online being the future – but without sacrificing quality,' he stated.

Looking to a 4K future

Srinivasan explained that the Kaleidescape Cinema One is aimed at enthusiasts living in homes such as apartments that preclude the use of a bespoke home cinema room. Once a Kaleidescape One is full to capacity it can be used simply as a Blu-ray player or it can be daisy-chained to additional units.

He also revealed that Kaleidescape is excited by the arrival of Ultra HD, as it fits with the high-end nature of its customer base – 'but you have got to get more content first.' However, he admits that the Kaleidescape Cinema One is incompatible with Sony's fledgling 2K4K remastered discs, something which will be rectified with the next generation of players.



The 4TB Cinema One is designed for use in living-rooms

PLAYLIST...

Team HCC spins up its disc picks of the month

Oz the Great and Powerful 3D (All-region BD)

Sam Raimi's fantasy blockbuster conjures up the kind of spectacular stereoscopic visuals and deft lossless audio your home cinema system was made for



Injustice: Gods Among Us (Xbox 360/PS3/Wii U)



News of an upcoming *Batman vs Superman* film had us reaching for this superpowered beat 'em up to settle that brawl for ourselves

The Ultimate Vacation Collection (All-region BD)



Why go abroad when you can stay at home and share in a quartet of classic Griswold family outings thanks to this Blu-ray boxset?

Castle Freak (All-region BD)



An impressive HD upgrade for this superior chiller is bolstered by extras including the previously lost H.P. Lovecraft short *The Evil Clergyman*

The Returned (R2 DVD)



The film that inspired the hit French TV series is now available on DVD in the UK. Well worth a look

LOADING...

Team HCC's pick of the hottest BD and DVD news

A damn fine BD boxset?



Not only is CBS hard at work preparing David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* for a late 2013/early 2014 Blu-ray release in the US, but rumours also indicate that it has secured the rights to include Lynch's movie prequel *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* in the set as well. Let's just hope that, if true, it's an improvement on Universal's UK release of the film, which was plagued by myriad technical problems.

Hunting for 3D thrills



20th Century Fox has confirmed that it will be giving *Predator* a 3D makeover on Blu-ray this Christmas.

As well as the regular release, fans can grab a limited edition – housed in a replica *Predator* head – from December 16.

Look who's stalking



Curse of Chucky, the latest instalment in the *Child's Play* series, will be hitting Blu-ray and DVD in the UK on

October 21. The former will be a barebones release, but the Blu-ray includes a commentary, deleted scenes, storyboards, a gag reel and a trio of *Making of...* featurettes.

Tomorrow's AV world today

Tech boutique's Smart App-artment is the future of home automation

It may look like a cross between the *Big Brother* house and *Thunderbirds*' Tracy Island, but the Cornflake App-artment is the future of Smart home technology, according to CEO Robin Shephard.

Built at a cost of £1.4m (and that doesn't include around £500,000 for all the toys), this leading-edge luxury pad in London is described as 'experiential retailing,' meaning potential buyers can try the latest intelligent home tech on for size before committing to a custom install build.

AV is used extensively throughout. The building itself can be controlled by an app for iOS devices or via the interactive Flat

Frog touchscreens dotted around. The Cartier kit list includes high-end Bowers & Wilkins speakers, McIntosh hi-fi, Crestron system control and Lutron blinds and lighting. Even the bathrooms have integrated Aquavision mirror TVs.

Like any des res, there's a dedicated home cinema, here featuring (2D) Runco projection with anamorphic lens sled, with a Kaleidescape movie server as the source. There's also a dedicated gaming area and bar, fitted out with Xbox Kinect and a revolving stage (for extra wow). Not every bit of kit on offer is automated and connected though – a traditional Wurlitzer jukebox adds retro chic with standalone tunes.

The venue makes astonishing use of LED lighting. Even though the complex is entirely underground, there's a sense of airy brightness which has been created through the use of LEDs allied to *faux* skylights and windows. 'During the fire inspection,



Robin Shephard: 'We look after all our clients' technology, from their iPad to their cinema, lighting and IT, with 24/7 support'

an officer asked us to open the windows so that he could check the fire escape into the garden!' reveals Shephard. 'The effect is very convincing...'

Taking it to the (I)max

Behind the concept is a service called Cornflake Concierge. 'Clients sign up with us for a long-term relationship,' explains Shephard. 'We look after all their technology, from their iPad to their cinema, lighting and IT, with 24/7 support.'

The incredible slickness of Cornflake's show home has already seen high-net-worth visitors waltz in off the street and blithely order the entire apartment, including fittings, automated coffee machine and intelligent kitchen.

And there's more big news to come from Cornflake, too. The company revealed to HCC it has exclusive distribution rights for IMAX in the home. 'We don't expect to sell many,' admits Shephard, 'because they're still quite expensive and quite large – you need \$2.3m and a minimum 45ft room, but they will sell, because as a brand IMAX is perceived as the *crème de la crème*.' The IMAX home system, explains the Cornflake CEO, comprises no fewer than three projectors which use a mirror arrangement for unbeatable brightness and image depth. 'Whether you want a theatre with 70 seats, or just 12, you still pay \$2.3m,' says Shephard.

We'd better start saving our pennies then...



Hage takes a bite of the Apple

I.T. specialist's new OutClass media server brings Blu-ray and DVD ripping to Apple TV

Hage Ltd. has launched the world's first plug and play movie and music server/storage solution dedicated to Apple TV.

The OutClass server is available as both a standalone device (with between 1TB and 4TB RAID 1 internal storage) or in a rack-mountable configuration (containing up to 60TB or RAID 5 disc storage). Alternately, it can also be purchased for use with an external NAS drive.

The OutClass server also allows users to configure the system to rip discs to whatever format they require. Meanwhile, Apple TV compatibility is

ensured by automatic conversion to the M4V format after the initial media is ripped, then automatically adding it to iTunes hosted on the server.

'People can now take their Apple TV to the next level... without the need for complex and costly distributed AV systems,' claims Hage Ltd. MD Adam Brinton. 'And it allows installers to supply a simple but effective multiroom AV system, cutting installation time and removing the need for support visits.'



The rack-mountable OutClass server offers up to 60TB of storage



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JVC

DIARY

Our calendar ensures that you don't miss out...

→ AUGUST

23: Jurassic Park 3D

This stereoscopic makeover of Spielberg's blockbuster stomps into UK cinemas – only four months after it was released on Blu-ray in the US... www.universalpictures.co.uk

26: Maison Close: Season Two

Get ready for even more saucy antics in 19th Century Paris as the second season of this acclaimed French TV show arrives on DVD and Blu-ray. www.arrowfilms.co.uk

28: Pain & Gain

Michael Bay helms this true story starring Mark Wahlberg, Dwayne Johnson and Anthony Mackie as bodybuilders who become involved in kidnapping and extortion. Feel the burn for yourself as *Pain & Gain* hits UK cinemas. www.paramountpictures.co.uk

→ SEPTEMBER

02: Mastered in 4K

Sony releases the first eight titles in its 'Mastered in 4K' range of Blu-rays with enhanced AV quality to the UK. We're particularly looking forward to giving *Ghostbusters*, *Taxi Driver* and *The Amazing Spider-Man* a spin. www.sonypictures.co.uk

04: Iron Man 3

Robert Downey Jr. jumps back into the armour and is reunited with his *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* director Shane Black for this latest action-packed blockbuster. Pick it up on Blu-ray, 3D Blu-ray and DVD. www.disney.co.uk

06: IFA 2013

The Messe Berlin throws open its doors today and welcomes visitors to Europe's biggest tech expo, where they'll be able to check out the latest home cinema hardware. www.ifa-berlin.com

13: Rush

Motorsports fans should race down to their nearest cinema to catch Ron Howard's film about the famous rivalry between Formula One drivers James Hunt and Niki Lauda. www.studiocanal.co.uk

19: HCC #226

The next issue of your favourite home cinema magazine hits the stands today, packed with hardware tests, features, outspoken opinion and in-depth software reviews. www.homecinemachoice.com

INTERVIEW

Supernatural streaming

TheHorrorShow.tv co-founder and co-curator **David Hughes** tells HCC about the launch of the UK's first VOD platform for horror fans...

**Where did the idea for The Horror Show first come from?**

'As a long-standing horror fan – years ago, I was editor of the professional horror magazine *Skeleton Crew* – I wondered whatever happened to all the films I've seen at FrightFest over the years, that never seem to turn up anywhere.

'I was also tired of chasing lesser-known horror films around Netflix, iTunes, LoveFilm, etc. I much preferred browsing in the horror section of HMV. But eventually even that looked like it was going to vanish. So I thought, "Somebody should make a dedicated horror VOD platform". And as nobody else did, I kind of had to do it myself.'

How does the service differ from other VOD platforms with dedicated horror genre sections amongst their content?

'Aside from our growing number of UK exclusives like *Marianne*, *The Casebook of Eddie Brewer* and *Insatiable* – and we have lots more exclusive single-film deals in the works – we plan to be the only curated platform for horror fans.

'So rather than just being an afterthought of iTunes (where only the triple-A titles will really get a push) or LoveFilm or Netflix, (where package deals are king), we are able to get behind every title in our catalogue. Hopefully, people will always be able to find interesting films, without getting tangled in the interwebs.'

You've clearly forged some productive links with smaller distributors. But what about the major Hollywood labels?

'We are in the process of thrashing out deals with all of the UK distributors who have the kind of horror content we're looking for.

'However the bigger distributor deals are thornier to wade



through – some of the contracts are thicker than the film scripts! So they've taken a bit longer.

'But with the amazing support from some smaller distributors, we've already built up a catalogue of around 50 titles. And there are many more coming on-stream – either to rent, buy, or both – by the end of the year.'

How often do you expect to be adding titles to the platform?

'We launched in June with 30 titles, and by the time this is published we'll be at 50. And we plan to double that number by the end of the year.

'Of course, we'll have scouts at FrightFest and GrimmFest looking for new content that has slipped through the distribution net – which is one of our most exciting points of difference from iTunes, Netflix, etc.'

What video and audio formats are supported by the platform?

'At the moment, we use the best possible version of the film we are provided by the distributors. And from that we have to make various versions so that each film is compatible with a range of different browsers and bandwidth capabilities – allowing you to watch them on anything from your phone to a web-enabled TV.

The Horror Show's content runs from recent chillers to short film collections

'We also have our first exclusive audio commentaries available now, and we hope to offer more exclusive extras as we build on the foundations. But we only launched in June so it's still really early days.'

Do you have any personal favourites among the titles currently on offer?

'Aside from *The Short Stack* [a collection of ten short films for 99p], which I watch again and again on my phone, my current favourite would be the '70s Spanish horror film *Who Can Kill A Child?* just because I hadn't seen it for years, and I was very excited to get the fully restored edition.

'I also love Filip Tegstedt's *Marianne*, the Swedish supernatural horror with Peter Stormare, and *The Casebook of Eddie Brewer*. And I was really proud that we could bring them to the UK for the first time. Of course, later in the year I'll have a lot more films to play favourites with and it'll be a lot harder to choose!'

Visit www.thehorrorshow.tv to find out more about The Horror Show's VOD service

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



1 Now TV exclusive to LG

LG has inked a one-year deal with Sky to provide exclusive Smart TV access to the latter's Now TV subscription VOD service, which offers access to Sky Sports (via a day-pass) and the company's movies catalogue (through a monthly subscription). The Now TV app is available on all 2012/2013 LG Smart TVs and selected home cinema products...

2 Now TV for all!

...However, if you don't own an LG Smart TV, don't worry. Sky has also unveiled a new £10 Now TV streaming box that brings the VOD service to any screen. The tiny box ('smaller than a beer mat' according to Sky) connects to your TV via HDMI and allows access via your Wi-Fi network to the Sky Movies and Sky Sports VOD services, as well as BBC iPlayer, Demand 5 and others.

3 Streaming dongle

Speaking of devices to plug into your TV, over in the US Google has launched Chromecast, a budget-priced (\$35) HDMI dongle that streams any content from your tablet, smartphone or laptop to your flatscreen. Consumers can currently stream from Netflix, YouTube and Google Play, but Google is promising more enabled apps in the coming months.

4 BBC to boost HD output

Good news for those of you left wondering how to catch your favourite Scandinavian crime shows in hi-def after the BBC replaced its catch-all BBC HD channel with the simulcast BBC 2 HD. The Corporation has announced that it will launch five new HD channels by early 2014 – BBC3 HD, BBC4 HD, BBC News HD, CBeebies HD and CBBC HD. Space freed up by the analogue switch-off will be used to punt the new hi-def services onto Freeview.

5 Panny 4K TV on the horizon?

Rumours are rife that Panasonic will release its first 4K TVs in the very near future. A report by the Nikkei suggests that the first

models will hit Japan and Europe 'this Fall'. If true, expect them to be at this year's IFA tech show.

6 Hybrid streaming

European streaming service Wuaki.tv has launched the UK's first hybrid TV and film platform, offering rental and purchase options alongside a subscription service. The Wuaki Plus subscription is priced at £5.99 per month, and content will be available in HD and SD depending on the device being used.

7 Global TV sales on the rise

The latest market report from Futuresource Consulting claims that the global TV market will return to growth this year, despite the fact that shipments fell by six per cent in 2012. It also claims that 4K TV is 'on track to become a significant technology segment', with global shipments

expected to rise from 62,000 units last year to a whopping 22,000,000 units in 2017.

8 Rest in peace

Dr. Amar Bose, sound pioneer and founder of one of the most recognisable consumer audio brands in the world (that would be Bose, in case you hadn't twigged), passed away in July at the age of 83.

9 On the move

IAG UK (the British arm of International Audio Group and home of various brands including Audiolab, Quad and Wharfedale) has relocated to a new purpose-built complex in Huntingdon. 'The new building will enhance our operational capabilities in the UK and help maintain British audio talent at the heart of IAG's activities for many years to come,' says managing director Tim Harris.

10 Modular thinking

UK distributor The Multi-Room Company has added Sanus' new Stackable Skeleton Racks to its range of custom install kit. The CFR1615 (15U) and CFR1620 (20U) racks employ a modular and stackable design that can be combined to make five different height combinations. Sanus also claims that they have been designed specifically for ease of use with an installation speed of around 15 minutes per rack. The racks can support up to 275kg on the floor, or up to 90kg when wall-mounted.



PREMIERE

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

Hanks back for Brown

It seems that Tom Hanks will be reuniting with director Ron Howard and writer David Koepp for a third Dan Brown adaptation. Oddly, the filmmakers are skipping the third book (*The Lost Symbol*) and will be tackling this year's *Inferno* instead.

Depp goes Mad again



Johnny Depp is reportedly getting ready to dust off his wild headgear for a repeat performance as the Mad Hatter in a sequel to *Alice in Wonderland*. James (The Muppets) Bobin is expected to step into Tim Burton's shoes as director.

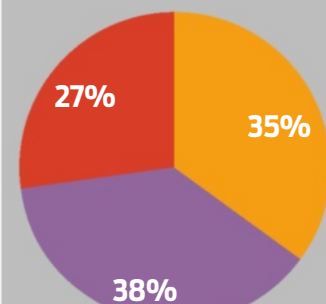
Legendary madness

Guillermo del Toro's long-rumoured big-budget adaptation of H.P. Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* could be back on at Universal, after Legendary Pictures (the production company behind the filmmaker's recent blockbuster *Pacific Rim*) left Warner Bros and inked a five-year deal with Universal Pictures.

WE ASKED...

Were you disappointed by the BBC's decision to stop 3D programming?

- Yes – we need free 3D content
- No – it was a waste of money
- Meh – I don't care either way



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action

Robo-wars

Pacific Rim → Warner Home Video
→ All-region BD/R2 DVD



Summer blockbusters don't come much bigger than Guillermo del Toro's latest sci-fi smash *Pacific Rim*, which sees humans piloting gigantic robots to wage war on colossal monsters that emerge from a portal on the ocean floor! While Warner Home Video is remaining tight-

lipped about the BD and DVD releases (expected in November), del Toro has confirmed that fans will get an 'open and honest' commentary, deleted scenes and a wealth of behind-the-scenes video. The *Hellboy* director also says that there are no plans for an Extended Edition.



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HIGH END
HERO

Hitting dealers' shelves with a price tag far beyond its mass-market rivals, Arcam's new seven-channel AVR has a lot to live up to. And it succeeds...



IT'S PROBABLY FAIR to say that Arcam doesn't rush its AV receivers to market. It's been four years since the launch of the brand's last flagship, the AVR600, which in the world of home electronics is something of an age. At least the brand doesn't undersell them when they arrive. The AVR750, it says, is not just the finest home cinema receiver it's ever made – it's also the best-sounding stereo amplifier, too. Quite a claim, and the guys from Cambridge may well be right.

Certainly this new AVR is a powerful vindication of the company's philosophy that there needn't be an unbridgeable divide between two-channel and multichannel entertainment. Whether playing Lou Reed's

Transformer or Michael Bay's *Transformers*, there's an authority to this amplifier that's deeply reassuring. But there's also a conservatism to the feature specification that may well disappoint badge-hunters.

Arcam's a very different company now to what it was when it first released the AVR600. The brand has shifted manufacturing from the UK, and found a new lease of life via its series of new media accessories. Both impact the AVR750 in different ways.

Back in the day, Arcam receivers were just a little bit cranky, which set them apart from their mainstream competition just as surely as their sonic attributes. That eccentricity has

been ironed out of the AVR750; it feels altogether more polished and refined and is a much smoother component to drive. The Arcam behaves much as you'd expect it to, while the clear-cut specification makes it a supremely easy AVR to install and tune.

In terms of design, this newcomer is just beautiful. Its clean lines and dark-grey bodywork reflect the familiar FMJ aesthetic. There are no hidden flaps or manual control knobs. The fascia merely presents a status display window underscored by a dozen buttons, which offer on-body +/- input selection and volume control, mode selection and so on. A 3.5mm aux input for both analogue and optical digital



Steve May has been testing AV receivers since the 1990s and was once excited by composite video inputs. Now he gets annoyed if he spots one



sources and a 3.5mm headphone jack offer the only front-panel hookup.

At 16.7kg, the model also exhibits serious heft. The neatly laid-out rear panel is as generous as it is clean. There are seven HDMI inputs and two outputs, both of which are ARC (Audio Return Channel) compatible. Curiously, one of the inputs is labelled VCR, which is clearly a little ridiculous. This vestigial nomenclature can also be found on the remote control.

There's also a trio of component inputs, four legacy phono AV inputs and a Zone 2 analogue output. Digital audio options include two optical and four coaxial. Should you feel the need to haul in an external power pusher, there's also a 7.1 bank of pre-amp outputs. As is the trend these days, though, there are no multichannel analogue inputs. This might just be an issue if you have a legacy Super Audio CD/DVD-Audio deck.

The receiver is a seven-channel design, using multi-voltage Class G amplification. It can be configured as a full 7.1 system,

or as 5.1 with two channels serving a second zone. Alternatively, users can opt to bi-amp the front stereo pair in 5.1. For this review, the AVR750 was run in its 7.1 configuration.

Network entertainment is delivered via an Ethernet input; there's also a rear-mounted USB, which when the HDMI inputs are populated becomes virtually unusable. External control support includes RS232, plus 12V and IR triggers, which can automatically switch on connected kit.

Revamped electronics

While some elements of the AVR750 recall its antecedents, there have been big changes beneath the hood. The entire HDMI and video processing stage is new, sourced from Analog Devices. This is quite a change from its predecessor, which featured software specifically written in-house by Arcam. Unfortunately, that bravery led to a number of reliability issues. In comparison, this platform appears bulletproof. The receiver's video switching time has improved, too, and



The AVR750's design is minimal and classy

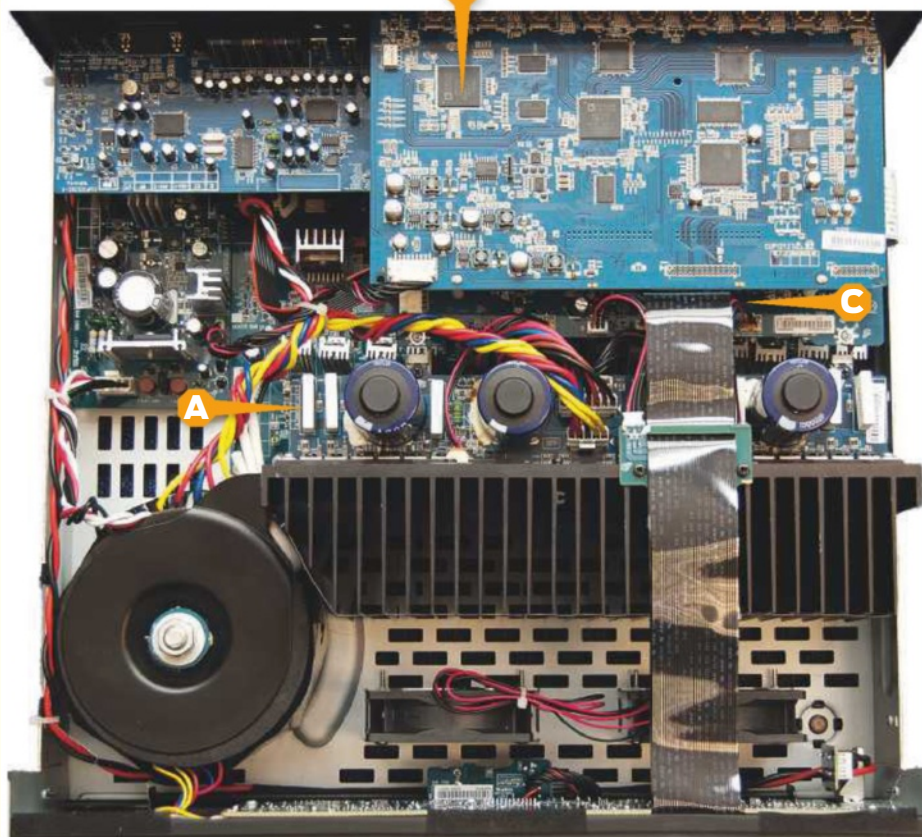
the AVR basically handshakes with every hot plug as soon as it's powered up, which dramatically improves overall slickness and usability. All sources can be upscaled to 4K resolution.

The supplied CR450 remote is a backlit, learning zapper. It also comes pre-programmed for other Arcam devices, and, in time-honoured tradition, button functionality changes depending on which source device is selected. A comprehensive guide to this multi-functionality is provided in the tutorial booklet.

Despite its high-end designation, the AVR750 is not a difficult receiver to set up and optimize. Typically in a home cinema system, you'll declare all speakers to be small regardless of their physical size, thereby allowing the subwoofer to handle lower-frequency information. However, given the AVR750's audiophile leanings, this approach may not always be appropriate; helpfully, you can elect to configure the AVR750 for stereo listening differently.

The Arcam ships with an Auto Speaker setup calibration mic, which performs the usual enclosure measurements and room EQ sleight of hand. You can elect to manually select which inputs benefit from this equalisation – ideal if you prefer certain sources uncoloured. While I preferred the AVR750 *sans* EQ in two-channel mode, this calibration certainly helped multichannel material. The routine takes a little longer to complete than rival systems, but positional accuracy is very good. Inevitably, though, some further tweaking was done to get the most agreeable sound balance.

When it comes to a user interface, the AVR750 offers a utilitarian face to the world. ➤



Taking the top off: inside Arcam's AVR750

A Class G

The AVR750 employs a revised and refined seven-channel Class G amplifier for 'clean and tight power delivery'

B Okay for 4K

An Analog Devices 4K processor enables Ultra HD passthrough, and upscaling of hi-def and standard-def sources to 3,840 x 2,160

C Shhhhh!

Audio clarity is improved, says Arcam, by virtue of an ultra-low-noise pre-amplifier with discrete electronic volume control

The Best of the Best



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In fact, the UI is the same as that featured on the AVR600, but at least it's far more responsive this time around. Cinephiles more concerned with the performance chops of the system are unlikely to be put off by such frugality.

The AVR750 is networked for audio, offering playback from uPnP-enabled

'Arcam's new receiver is breathtakingly exciting – fast and furious and with huge dynamics'

devices, as well as internet radio via vTuner. Media compatibility is standard, with MP3, WMA, WAV, FLAC and M4A/AAC files all playing from both USB and across a network from a NAS. There's no album art support,

though. There's no screensaver mode, either – so plasma owners beware.

Two-channel tenacity

In audiophile guise, Stereo Direct is the way to go. This bypasses all processing and circumnavigates surround effects. As there's no bass management, nothing is directed to the subwoofer channel. The resulting two-channel performance is positively seductive.

Seraphim (Angel Mix) by Digital, a FLAC download from Linn Records, has a soundtrack that grows wider and deeper as the track progresses, and the AVR750 sings along sweetly. Arcam makes no bones about the fact that this receiver has been engineered first and foremost to convey believable music, confident that once that's achieved all other aspects will fall into place.

The AVR750 sounds similarly glorious with multichannel music (EQ employed). Kosuke Yamashita's *The Earth Overture* in 192kHz/24-bit 7.1 Linear PCM is suitably grandiose.

Of course, AV-Holics might be forgiven for thinking that any AVR whose DNA was forged in a musical furnace will sound fey and gutless with ballsy action fare. However, this Arcam will prove them wrong. The AVR750 is brawnier than a pumped-up Sylvester Stallone – an analogy given credence by the lengthy pre-credit sequence in *The Expendables 2* (Blu-ray). The AVR750 delivers the magnificent chaos of this madcap 7.1 DTS-HD Master Audio mix without the vaguest hint of exhaustion. As Sly's Bad Attitude convoy blasts through the Nepalese compound, the receiver disgorges ordnance and falling masonry with huge dynamics. The wraparound imaging is fast and furious, with dialogue cleanly delineated (no mean feat given the scenery-chewing cast). It's all breathlessly exciting. There's a temptation with the AVR750 to see just how far you can push its reserves, but in anything other than a theatre-sized space you'll hit the pain threshold before the receiver squirms.

A heady mixture of digital and analogue connections



Connections

A Zone 2

The Zone 2 stereo and composite video outputs allow a two-channel second zone system to be run from the AVR

B Preamp output

Should you wish you can pre-amp out all channels to an external power amp

C USB connection

While the rear-mounted USB will play the same selection of audio files as those across a network, the awkward rear-placement makes it unlikely to see much casual use

D Dual HDMI output

The AVR750 offers a paired HDMI output, for screen and projector use. Both are Audio Return Channel compatible, allowing your TV's audio to be routed back into the AVR as a source

The AVR750 doesn't feature an over-abundance of multichannel processing modes. Codec support covers the basics – Dolby TrueHD, Dolby Digital Plus and Pro-Logic IIx, along with DTS-HD MA and DTS-ES 6.1. Arcam's top-flight receiver holds no truck with height or width processing (hardly surprising considering it only offers seven channels) nor any of the virtual science proffered by the likes of Sony's STR-DA5800ES. This is very much a classical AV package.

That's not to say fun can't be had with some of the Arcam's old-school modes. With genuine 7.1 mixes still in short supply, Dolby Digital EX works well in fleshing out the surround with 5.1 sources. The opening sequence to *Transformers: Dark of The Moon* (Sky Movies) immediately becomes more immersive when EX is applied. As the animated Paramount logo encircles the listener, the 360-degree pan gets a little vague in 5.1; with EX on and those rear back channels engaged, there's no holes in the wall of sound.

The receiver is rated to deliver 130W (into eight Ohms) with two channels driven, dropping to around 100W when all seven channels are in flight. However, this doesn't really give a sense of the transient response offered by the onboard power plant. This can run 20W of low-distortion Class A across all

channels (more than the AVR600 and cooler, too), but switches in another supply using larger capacitors when things really kick off. Which is probably why it sounds so elegant with music but is unfazed by mayhem.

As an aside, it's worth mentioning that I also listened to the AVR750 utilising Arcam's inspired rBlink. A diminutive Bluetooth DAC, this allows users to stream from their mobile

device to the big AVR. The results were surprisingly musical.

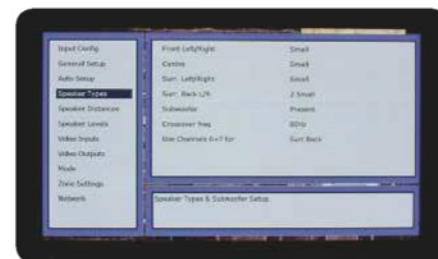
Effortlessly confident

There is no escaping the fact that Arcam's AVR750 is a magnificent-sounding AV receiver. Easily the most accomplished AVR from the brand to date, it's effortlessly confident with multichannel and is a luxurious two-channel listen as well. While it's perhaps regrettable that little operational niceties such as HDMI passthrough and GUI flourishes have been ignored, particularly given the lofty price point, the business-like specification probably won't worry those seeking second-to-none audio. This delivers a titanic listening experience, regardless of your sound and vision predilection. Book a demo now ■



Like the AVR, the handset is a stripped-back affair

ON THE MENU



→ The Arcam features a no-nonsense, straightforward user interface, borrowed from its AVR600 predecessor but now faster to browse

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. Plus Dolby Digital EX; Dolby Pro-Logic IIx

DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. Plus DTS-ES 6.1 Discrete; DTS-ES 6.1 Matrix;

THX: No

MULTICHANNEL INPUT: No

MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 7 x 100W

MULTIROOM: Yes. Second zone, analogue audio/video

AV INPUTS: 4 x composite; 4 x digital audio (2 x optical; 2 x coaxial)

HDMI: Yes. 7 x inputs; 2 x outputs

COMPONENT VIDEO: 3 x inputs

VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K

DIMENSIONS: 433(w) x 425(d) x 171(h)mm

WEIGHT: 16.7kg

ALSO FEATURING: Ethernet; USB; vTuner 'net radio; AM/FM radio; Auto Speaker Calibration; RS232; 12V trigger; learning backlit remote control; Class G amplification; 7.1-channel pre-outs; free iPad remote app; 4K and 3D passthrough; media file playback via USB or network; Stereo Direct mode

HCC VERDICT



Arcam FMJ AVR750

→ £4,000 Approx → www.arcam.co.uk

→ Tel: 01223 203200

HIGHS: Marvellous sound quality with wonderful clarity and huge dynamics; simple to set up and use; sturdy build quality and fuss-free design

LOWS: No HDMI passthrough; no integrated web services beyond vTuner; USB port is awkward to access; silly VCR input label

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

BROTHERS IN AMPS

They may hail from the same factory and share components but there's a world of sonic difference between Denon and Marantz. **Steve May** reports from the duo's recent joint European product preview

FOR MOST OF the year Denon and Marantz compete for your ears with similarly specified, high-performance AV components. To casual observers little would appear to link the two brands. But at least once every 12 months these hi-fi veterans buddy up to present a united front for a high-profile launch of new product. The reason for this co-operation is that they're owned by the same (US) parent company, the D+M Group.

This year's hardware hoopla took place in Sorrento, Italy, an event made all the more special as it marked the 60th anniversary of the Marantz brand. A museum of kit dating back to the '50s provided a fitting adjunct to the latest components. Some of the pieces were so rare even some long-time employees had never seen them before.

AVRs in 14 years), starting at just £250 for the bargain basement AVR-X500. At the other end of the range, the top-line offering for 2013 is the 9.2-channel £1,200 AVR-X4000. Feature attractions here include a revamped user interface with a graphical Setup Assistant, 4K upscaling and passthrough, support for DSD over HDMI, Apple AirPlay and Spotify. The receiver has a 200W powerplant, can pre-out to 11.2 and boasts three HDMI outputs. The AVR-4313 from 2012 remains the Denon flagship, however.

Heading up the neighbouring Marantz fleet was the 9.2-channel £1,400 SR7008, with a nigh-on identical specification to Denon's AVR-X4000. If you were just running the numbers you might suspect them to be basically the same boxes. But just how similar are these home theatre titans beneath the hood? D+M confirms they ship from the same factory and concedes they share a common construction platform; indeed, comparing PCBs from the lower-down-the-line AVR-X3000 with the SR6008 reveals clear similarities.

The Denon AVR-X4000 provides 11.2-channel pre-outs and supports DSD over HDMI

Hoping to have the X factor

At the unveiling, Denon trumpeted its new X-Series receivers (the first nomenclature change for Denon





However, it would be a mistake to consider the two models essentially the same. Marantz cites the involvement of audio tuning guru Ken Ishiwata – who has been largely responsible for steering the brand's sonic direction since joining in 1978 – and proprietary technologies such as the HDAM (Hyper

'The engineers respect each other, but want to keep their own identities – the philosophy of the brands is quite different'

Dynamic Amplifier Module) circuit on all its SR Series AV receivers, as telltale differences. HDAM has been employed in some guise or another on various Marantz products since the early 1990s, replacing more commonly used op-amps. The advantage, says the brand, is a reduced electrical noise level and a highly dynamic performance. It's HDAMs which contribute

The SR7008 uses Marantz' proprietary HDAM technology

to the characteristic sound of all higher-end Marantz amplifiers.

Denon's secret weapon

While Ishiwata is a familiar name to audiophiles around the world, Denon's in-house sound-meister is somewhat more elusive. Susumu Yoneda has been similarly overseeing Denon's audio tuning for decades. Originally a speaker engineer, Yoneda-san has final approval over Denon's key product lines – if he's not happy then it doesn't get released.

Denon Europe's Takamitsu Hashimoto told HCC: 'We have a senior sound engineering team, comprising representatives from each category. Yoneda-san is the leader of this team. Think of him as Master Yoda of the Jedi Council!'

When asked just how the two companies approach the tuning of their products, Hashimoto explains: 'The aim of a Denon product is to accurately reproduce the content of the disc or file, while at Marantz the idea is to create musicality; the philosophy between the two brands is quite different.

PICK 'N' MIX

How the other D+M 2013 AVRs line up

Denon AVR-X500, £250

The baby Denon is designed for entry-level setups. A five-channel amp, it's rated at offering 140W, and features four HDMI inputs and one output. There's no ARC or home networking here.

Denon AVR-X1000, £350

Step up a level and the AVR-X1000 introduces home networking, Audyssey MultEQ XT and an additional 5W per channel, amongst other tricks, to the specs of the AVR-X500. AirPlay is onboard, as is 'net radio.

Denon AVR-X2000, £500

This mid-ranger provides a claimed 7 x 150W power output, with the extra two channels enabling multiroom use or Dolby Pro-Logic IIz height processing as well as a tradition 7.1 array. HDMI upscaling is introduced.

Denon AVR-X3000, £800

Ramping up amplification to a claimed 180W per channel, the AVR-X3000 is aimed at home cinema enthusiasts courtesy of its secondary HDMI and subwoofer outputs and DTS Neo:X and Audyssey DSX post-processing.

Marantz SR5008, £600

The brand's most affordable SR receiver is a 7.2 design, giving music fans AirPlay, 'net radio, Spotify and last.fm. Connectivity includes seven HDMI inputs and one ARC output. Power is rated at 180W.

Marantz SR6008, £900

The SR6008 builds upon the feature set of the SR5008, but adds Audyssey DSX and DTS Neo:X, twin HDMI outputs, nine-channel pre outs, InstaPrevue and DSD support via HDMI. Power is increased, too.

In-ear headphones are now part of the Denon product stable



MARANTZ AT SIXTY

From a New York basement to a home cinema stalwart



Marantz' genesis can be tracked back to 1948, when founder Saul Marantz first began tinkering with home made pre-amps in his New York basement. By 1952 his interest had become professional, and he started to sell 'Audio Consolettes' to fellow hi-fi fans. The Marantz company was officially born one year later and a string of iconic products followed. The outfit was sold to US distributor SuperScope in 1964, with a Japanese sales office, Marantz Japan, following in 1968. Famously Marantz became a Philips subsidiary in 1980, where it remained until being sold in 2001. A year later, the company became part of the D+M Holdings group, partnered with Denon.

Both sets of engineers respect the ways of each other, but want to keep their own unique identities.'

It was clear at the Sorrento preview that parent company D+M wants to engineer even more fundamental differences between its charges. Denon, we were told by D+M UK managing director Jason Dear, is positioned at the 'younger, edgier' end of the market; this doesn't mean its legendary AV receivers now ship with complementary sneakers, more that the marque hopes to find fresh admirers through computer audio and headphone products. One niche that the brand has identified is fitness headphones, dubbed Exercise Freak, with integrated Bluetooth.

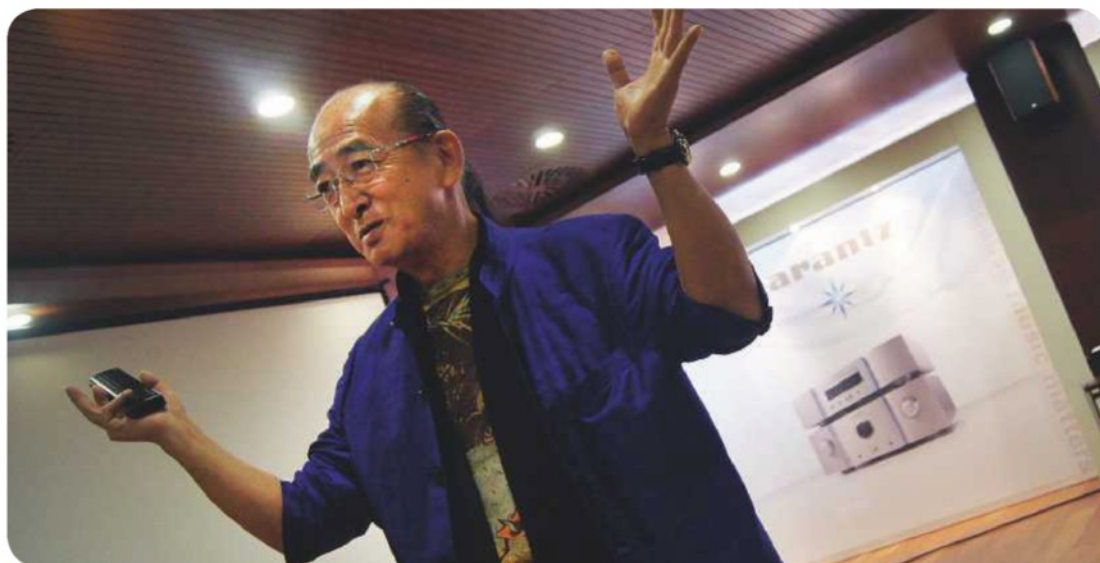
The company is also wading into the heaving soundbar market this October with the £350 DHT-T100 Soundbase. This tabletop enclosure has forward-facing stereo drivers and is designed to double as a TV stand. It can handle up to 27kg, which should easily accommodate TVs up to 50in. Connections comprise digital optical and coaxial inputs, plus phono stereo. The Soundbase is also Bluetooth-ready and aptX-enabled, allowing users to pair and stream music from mobile devices. Demonstrations impressed with both their volume and clarity. More such products will doubtless follow.

By comparison, Marantz is adopting a more refined pose, literally less edgy with more rounded

corners. Its multichannel AVRs are more Barbican than Brixton, while a new line of stylish network players are hoping to appeal to streaming enthusiasts. The funky M-CR610 Melody Media and the M-CR510 Melody Stream (like the Media but without CD player) systems join the NA-11S1 network player. The latter utilises an audiophile-grade TI DSD1792 DAC along with Marantz DSP processing and Digital Filter PEC777, described as 'a high-end algorithm previously used only in professional recording studios', here renamed Marantz Musical Mastering. Certainly in terms of sheer design, this year's Marantz offerings sing.

And at some point in the not too distant future, it's likely that Denon will reinvent itself yet again, this time as a multiroom wireless audio brand. While stressing that there has been no official confirmation, D+M Holdings chief Tim Bailey hinted to HCC that a rival to compete with Sonos was in development. 'Sonos has been very successful when it comes to wireless audio but we think there's a gap in the market for a high-performance solution.'

D+M UK's Jason Dear added: 'I think as an industry we have to understand the requirements of the consumer. For far too long we've sat back and produced the same-old, same-old. But the world's changing...' ■



Ken Ishiwata has been tuning Marantz hardware since the 1970s



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Blu-ray's biggest blunders

It's the highest-quality video format around and the basis of any home cinema setup, but as **Team HCC** reveals, the bigwigs behind Blu-ray have occasionally dropped the ball

AVATAR 3D

Why are we waiting?

James Cameron's sci-fi smash *Avatar* practically kickstarted the 3D revolution, proving that, with the right technology and film-making vision, stereoscopic movies could wow audiences and break box office records. Yet home cinema fans eager to witness the groundbreaking visuals on their 3D displays were left swearing in Na'vi at 20th Century Fox's decision to withhold the 3D Blu-ray release by a staggering two years, only issuing it to buyers of Panasonic hardware via an exclusivity deal.

The result was that some people got rich selling their rare platters on eBay (with prices at one point reaching around £300), while most people resorted to showing off their 3D hardware with the lacklustre *Alice in Wonderland*. And the industry wonders why 3D at home hasn't really taken off...



We hope we're not kept waiting as long for the 3D Blu-rays of the planned trio of *Avatar* sequels

GLADIATOR

Scrubbed up not so nicely

Hopes were high that Ridley Scott's Oscar-laden swords-n-sandals flick would become an instant Blu-ray classic, but the distributors (Paramount in the US and Universal in the UK) dashed them all with a transfer that quickly earned an imperial thumbs down from fans. Edge enhancement and digital noise reduction were the bugbears – the former making Russell Crowe's Maximus look like he'd actually been etched onto the screen, the latter robbing scenes of all their cinematic flavour and implying that botox was doing the rounds in the 2nd century. Equally annoying was that the automated system employed by the intern/janitor/cleaning lady entrusted with handling this hotly-anticipated disc managed to remove legitimate details – including whizzing arrows and balls of fire – from the image.

Thankfully, buyers were eventually given the option of swapping their platter for one unsullied by heavy-handed manipulation. Explained Paramount: 'While the version that we originally distributed was of the highest quality, some enthusiasts may prefer



The ultimate 3D blockbuster – only available in 2D!

BD-LIVE

The extra feature that no-one really wanted



A frustrating element of the Blu-ray launch was the BDA's insistence on tweaking the format's specification through new 'Profiles'. HD DVD was born fully formed; Blu-ray arrived with the tagline 'Profile 1.0', then added Bonus View functionality for Profile 1.1 and BD-Live for Profile 2.0. Yet those who held off buying a player until the 2.0 hardware arrived soon discovered that, for all the hype, the net-delivered content of BD-Live wasn't worth waiting for.



'At my signal, unleash digital noise reduction!'

to view it without the Edge Enhancement and DVNR implemented as standard process in bringing the film to hi-def.' You don't say.

INTO THE BLUE

A damp squib

What's the best way of garnering interest in a futuristic new video format? If you're Sony Pictures, it's releasing an initial slate of movies that most cinema fans just shrugged their shoulders at.

Into The Blue joined the likes of *xXx*, *50 First Dates* and *Stealth* in Sony's Summer 2006 Blu-ray lineup, and like those sported an inferior MPEG-2 encode at a time when VC-1 was already known to be the better bet. As such, the disc offered a picture that sold short the merits of the BD format. It wasn't the worst of the MPEG-2 clan (we were much more disturbed by *Hitch*), but the movie itself was an aquatic thriller with all the charm and intrigue of a baked cod. The logic here, we suppose, was that the idea of seeing Jessica Alba in a bikini and Paul Walker in his swimming shorts in 'glorious high-definition' would be a great way of capturing the public's attention – but *Team HCC* would rather have seen something from Sony's Columbia Pictures back catalogue given an HD makeover.

PREDATOR

Take a trip to Madame Tussauds

This science-fiction/action hybrid tells the story of a technologically-savvy alien hunter doing battle with an elite squad of waxwork figures in a Latin American jungle. Well, actually it doesn't, but this is certainly the impression given by Fox's disastrous and DNR-heavy 2010 Ultimate Hunter release, with rugged action stars including Arnold Schwarzenegger and Carl Weathers given such a ferocious polish that they looked like they'd never set foot outside their house, let alone spent years fighting clandestine wars.

Tellingly, this wasn't even the studio's first stab at releasing John McTiernan's '80s classic. Two years before it had issued a Blu-ray with a flat-looking transfer that showcased overt grain and a general softness. Perhaps the following Ultimate Edition was Fox's way of saying 'be careful what you wish for.' Who knows what we'll get from this December's 3D version...

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Criminal colouring

Fox's long-awaited 2009 Blu-ray release of the award-winning crime thriller is now famous for causing a public spat between its director William Friedkin and cinematographer Owen Roizman. The former oversaw a new digital remaster which tweaked the colour palette to give it a dreamy, pastel feel. The latter quickly damned it, saying 'I don't know what Billy was thinking. It's not the film that I shot, and I certainly want to wash my hands of having had anything to do with this transfer, which I feel is atrocious.' To be fair to Roizman he had a

Why bother with *Spider-Man* when you can kick-start Blu-ray with this?



Fans are still hunting for a decent Blu-ray release of *Predator*



The *French Connection*'s new colour timing means people look like they're at death's door before they're even shot



Loki's blade (circled, right) is still missing from the UK release of *Avengers Assemble*



point, as Popeye Doyle now patrols the mean streets of New York looking like he has food poisoning.

The good news is that Friedkin and Roizman eventually made up and collaborated on a 2012 HD master that retained some sense of natural colour – with Friedkin then claiming the first BD release had been the victim of poor authoring. The bad news is that the improved version is still not directly available in the UK. Smuggle the disc in from the US.

AVENGERS ASSEMBLE

Captain America vs. Captain Cock-Up

It was the biggest blockbuster of 2012, so there was no way that Walt Disney Home Entertainment was going to mess up the Blu-ray release of *Avengers Assemble*. Or so you'd think...

Trouble first appeared when the studio confirmed that the UK release wouldn't include Joss Whedon's director's commentary, because it had to deliver its assets to the disc replicator a month earlier than the US pressing in order to hit its chosen release date. A far bigger issue came to light, however, when the UK disc was released and it seemed the death of Agent Coulson has been altered, digitally removing

the blade piercing his chest. Initially Disney UK denied any jiggery-pokery, telling *HCC* that this was the same version that had played in UK theatres. A mere 24 hours it did a *volte face* and admitted that it *had* bungled the UK Blu-ray release, accidentally using a version prepared for a different region altogether. Whoops.

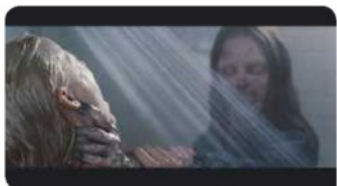
THE WARD/IRONCLAD

Warner's widescreen woes

There are some directors that frame all their films at 2.40:1 and horror king John Carpenter is one of them – that's why our very own Anton van Beek was surprised to find the pre-release copy of his 2010 movie *The Ward* offered in an open matte 1.78:1 version. After contacting distributor Warner Home Video – and with Carpenter himself subsequently taking to Twitter to complain – the release was eventually pushed back by six months to ensure the film was released in its proper aspect ratio.

Yet there was no such luck for medieval romp *Ironclad*, another Warner UK release, which made it to shops sporting a cropped 16:9 image in place of the original 2.35:1. With the shots of the siege of Rochester Castle therefore looking like little more

John Carpenter's *The Ward* as it should look (top) and how Warner initially planned to present it on BD (bottom)



Ironclad's medieval 'Magnificent Seven' is reduced to a 'Fabulous Five-and-a-Bit' thanks to the ham-fisted 16:9 cropping

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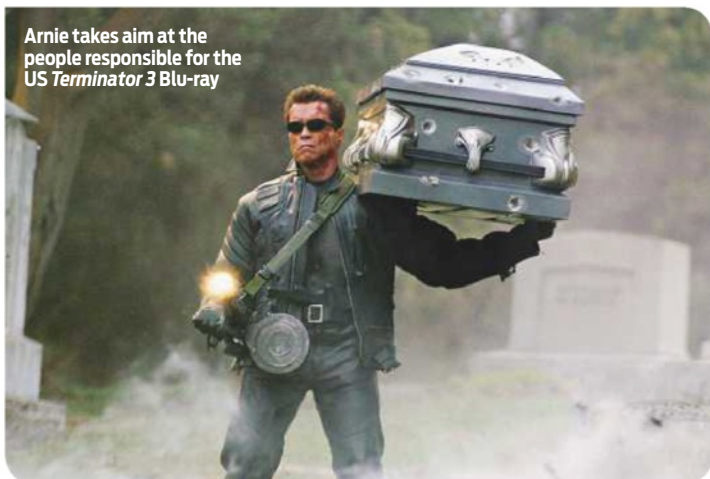
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Arnold takes aim at the people responsible for the US Terminator 3 Blu-ray

than two men running at a random portcullis, it ranks as one of the biggest botch jobs we can remember.

TERMINATOR 3: RISE OF THE MACHINES 'I'll be back with disappointing AV'

Warner Bros.' 2007 US Blu-ray release of this sci-fi sequel didn't quite hit the heights fans were expecting. Bafflingly, the film could only be viewed in 1080p if the picture-in-picture bonus feature was activated – if not you were stuck with a 1080i encode. And while this mishap was corrected on subsequent pressings of the disc, even these were still serving up a relatively weedy Dolby Digital 5.1 soundtrack. Those who had imported a copy where finally saved two years later when local distributor Sony Pictures released a UK Blu-ray that featured both a 1080p encode and a 5.1 Dolby TrueHD soundtrack.

E.T.: THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL Spielberg's pick 'n' mix soundtrack

When Steven Spielberg announced that last year's long-awaited BD outing for *E.T.* would offer the original theatrical cut rather than the controversial 2002 re-edit, fans were understandably delighted – and at first glance the disc was an absolute winner. However, closer inspection made it clear that the new 7.1 mix was derived from the 5.1 track prepared for the 2002 version. So what's the problem? Well, it includes audio cues that don't relate to any onscreen action (such as the sound of the CGI *E.T.* moving around while the puppet sits stationary on the ground) and omits a line of dialogue. You can check all this out for yourself, as the original stereo mix is also included on the disc – but only in lossy DTS ■



While the scientist on the left has a line of dialogue in the original track, she just flaps her lips to no avail in *E.T.*'s 7.1 remix



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The AV playroom

Mark Craven guides you through a dedicated cinema room that looks... groovy



The room used to function as a multipurpose 'playroom' before it was marked down for a home cinema makeover



Once the initial 3D plans had been approved, the installer began preparing the room – including moving the home's boilers to another location



The far end of the room was chosen for the wall-mounted projector screen, with a crescent-shaped step placed in front of it

THIS LUXURIOUS CINEMA room is the end result of a full makeover by North Yorkshire's Harrogate Home Cinema, and is affectionately known as The Modeon by its happy owner. An existing customer of the professional install firm, the project arose when he decided to fulfil a long-term dream and convert the old playroom in his house into a dedicated movie den.

The initial stage of the build involved the creation of 3D visuals to ensure the owner was getting exactly what he wanted. Then, once a layout design was approved, Harrogate Home Cinema began creating the technical specification, working, we're told, to a 'strict budget'. We haven't been given the exact cost of the whole setup, but we imagine the said budget wasn't exactly miserly...

When it boils down to it

'When we got the nod to crack on with the designs we were all pretty excited,' reveals the installer. 'There was just the small matter of moving the boilers responsible for heating the whole house out of the room and relocating them outside.'

With that initial problem overcome, the rip-out of the room began, in conjunction with the company's joinery and building partner SJF Designs (also based in Harrogate). New wiring was installed to replace the original room fixtures, including six new lighting circuits (all to be Rako-controlled), Cat6, HDMI, speaker wire and control cabling, plus air conditioning ducting and additional power provision.

After cabling was completed, the movie mecca could really take shape. Key to its

Kit checklist

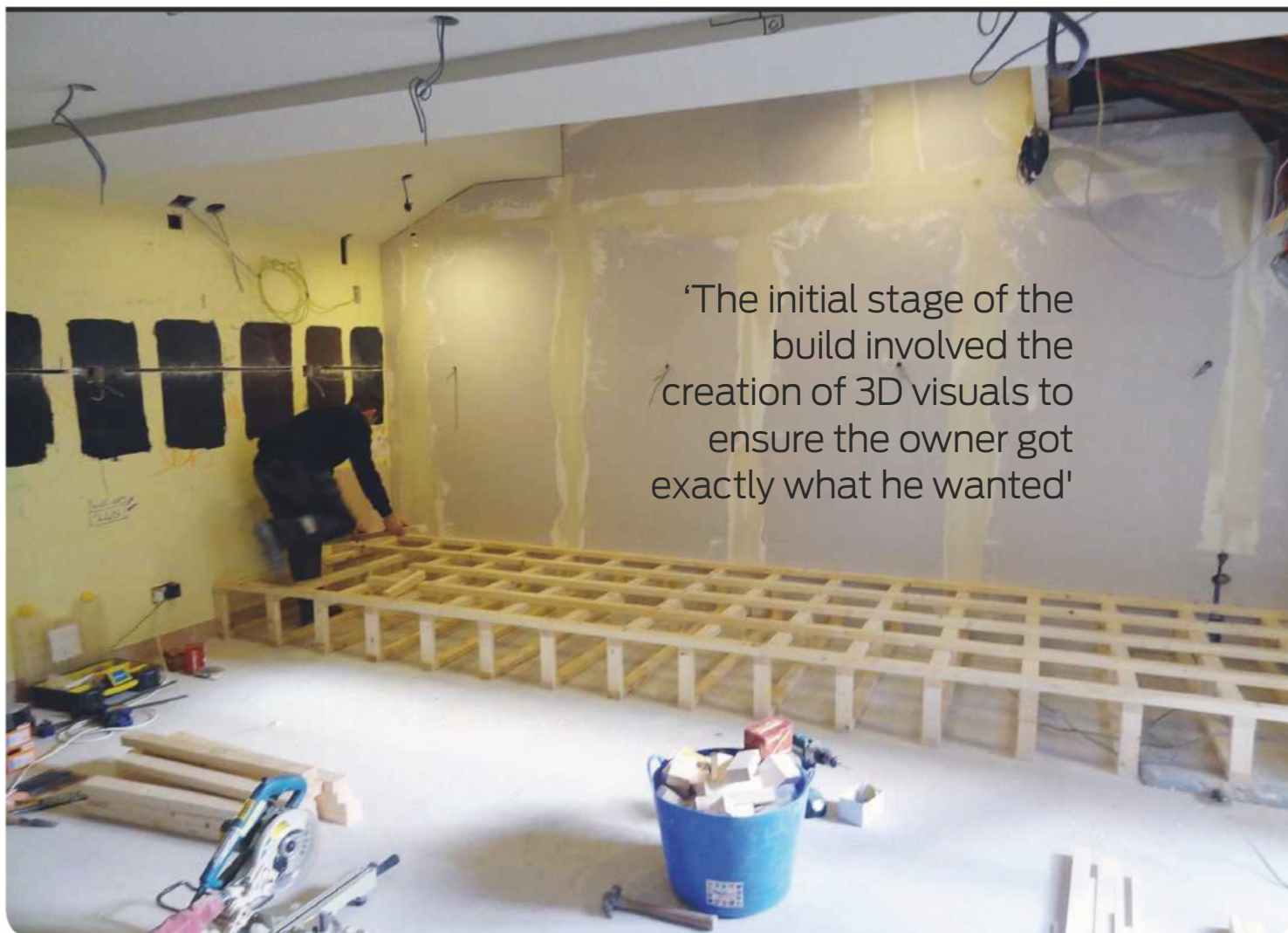
JVC: D-ILA X70 projector
ONKYO: TX-NR717 AV receiver
DRAPER: Three-metre Onyx acoustically-transparent screen
MONITOR AUDIO: In-wall W380s for front left/centre/right
MONITOR AUDIO: In-ceiling C380FXs for surround and rear back speakers
SUNFIRE: HRS-10 subwoofer (1,000W with 10in driver)
SKY: 2 x Sky+HD boxes
SONY: BDP-S790 Blu-ray player
APPLE: Apple TV
MICROSOFT: Xbox 360 with custom headphone integration
SONOS: Multiroom audio throughout house
RAKO: Dimming and switching
STARSCAPE: Custom-made dual Echofon star ceilings

EXTRAS: Edge-lit LED lighting in the ceiling; edge-lit custom wall panels; custom-designed iPad interface by Harrogate Home Cinema using DemoPad; commercial popcorn and slushy machine; 33U AV rack in bespoke hardware cabinet

design is the 15in raised seating stage at the rear, which was constructed to house the second four-chair tier of cinema seating. Additional fittings include false ceilings, wall-panel frames and the crescent-shaped step sitting below where the projector screen would eventually be sited. There were also doors and windows to block up, plus the small matter of custom-built hardware cabinetry.

Cables were tested and terminated before the decorators were let loose. After plastering, they implemented the chosen colour scheme >

The projector screen is a three-metre acoustically-transparent model from Draper



'The initial stage of the build involved the creation of 3D visuals to ensure the owner got exactly what he wanted'

– matt finishes and dark colours throughout, with blacks for the walls, grey for the ceiling and burgundy for the carpets and fabrics.

The second stage of the conversion was installation of hardware and lighting. First to go in were the two custom-made star ceilings from Starscape.co.uk. These two independently colour-changing ceiling panels were further enhanced by Rako controlled-ceiling circuits. Rounding out the awe-inspiring

lighting scheme are 15 fabric-covered backlit wall panels, here set to an eye-catching shade of purple. RGB strip lighting was selected for its custom colour-matching talents.

Taking a tablet

The lighting is all handled by a bespoke DemoPad iPad interface, provided by the installer. The owner's tablet is also used to drive the hardware, providing idiot-proof



A custom-made cabinet was fitted to house all the hardware components



Rako-controlled lights and two star ceilings add bespoke glamour



The installer teamed up with a local joinery expert to get the room's shell constructed and fitted

"Put into action with film soundtracks, the MASS system simply shines...the sound is crisp, detailed and utterly immersive."

Home Cinema Choice February 2013



Delivering the explosive charge of the latest hi-def movie soundtracks is Monitor Audio's diminutive MASS home cinema system. Its sculpted space-efficient design, packed with technology and easy-installation features, offers room-filling, jaw-dropping audio dynamics with décor-friendly styling.

Having received international acclaim for its excellent sound, the MASS home cinema speaker system has been recognised as a supreme example of lifestyle design as well, by wowing the 37-member "red dot" jury – a panel of international experts from the world of product design.



red dot design award
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Preparing the walls for the installation of the backlit fabric-covered wall panels – a key element of the finished design



With plastering complete and the walls and ceilings wired for sound and lighting, the room is beginning to take shape



A darkened colour scheme was chosen for the walls and ceilings – the soon-to-be-laid burgundy carpet adding a splash of colour

control of kit for watching movies and television, playing games or listening to music.

Given the lush design, the cinema room's AV electronics are perhaps not as overtly high-end as you might expect. A mid-range Onkyo TX-NR717 routes audio to the multichannel array, which is a 7.1 combination of Monitor Audio CT-380FX in-ceiling speakers, Monitor Audio W380s across the front soundstage and a Sunfire HRS-10 subwoofer. The latter is a diminutive bass bin,

with only a 10in driver, but it packs a potent 1,000W amplifier.

The bigscreen visuals are provided by a JVC D-ILA X70 projector, which fires its contrast-rich imagery onto a three-metre Draper Onyx acoustically-transparent screen (the MA speakers are mounted in the wall behind). Content is delivered by a 2012-era Sony BDP-S790 Blu-ray player, Sky+HD and an Apple TV box, which streams from the owner's media library. Apart from the PJ,

none of these slabs of silicon disrupt the room's clean lines – all are located in the aforementioned cabinet, supported by a whopping 33U AV roll rack.

Let the feast begin

Finishing touches in this smart-looking room include commercial-grade popcorn and slushy machines. If it was our den, we'd probably fire both up and not leave until the last kernel had been popped... ■



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REVIEWS

→ **HARDWARE HIGHLIGHTS** M&K SOUND THX Ultra 2-certified 5.1 array LG Blu-ray player/PVR combi PHILIPS Hybrid soundbar/5.1 system FINLUX 55in LED Smart TV for only £1,000 YAMAHA RX-V675 mid-range AV receiver LOGITECH Harmony Ultimate all-in-one remote DVDO 4K-enabled HDMI switch **ROUNDUP** Big-brand Smart platforms put through their paces **AND MORE!**

Black beauty

JVC's D-ILA X75 packs a 90:000:1 contrast ratio and e-Shift 2 tech. Does it deliver the goods? See p46



HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆



A slice of Hollywood for your home

Forget Peter Jackson and George Lucas – M&K Sound's THX-certified 5.1 array gets the seal of approval from our very own [Adam Rayner](#)

M&K Sound's 5.1 array uses Tripole speakers for the surround channels

plus the likes of *Wall-E*, *Iron Man* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. And I'm not talking about a professional-only set; I'm talking about the speakers auditioned here. So if you want a system with pedigree, M&K Sound's S150 lineup is exactly that.

Not your normal speaker

This 5.1 setup features boxes armed with lots of drivers, not really shaped like 'normal' speakers. They're designed to fade into the background décor of a cinema room – trying to install these into your regular living space might raise a few eyebrows from the rest of the family. They're also reassuringly costly. For the money that this relatively simple array is tagged at – £7,500 – you could get a lush set of floorstanders to gaze upon, with a superb performance to boot (KEF's R Series perhaps, or Monitor Audio's Gold GX). M&K Sound's system, therefore, needs to be pretty special.

This setup uses three of the company's S150 speakers, now in their MKII guise, for L/C/R duties, plus a pair of the unconventional Tripole models for the surrounds and its biggest X-branded woofer, the X12.

There are 8in and 10in subwoofers in the lineup that you can specify instead. Or you can have multiples in your room, by use of the subwoofer's line-out phono sockets on its rear panel.

There's a lot more to the woofer than you can see. The amp system drives a 12in transducer in the front, in a sealed, braced enclosure. However, there is another 12in cone, mounted inverted to the same enclosure, and – for once – this is not a passive radiator. It is driven and fires through a large port area in another enclosure, making this a 5th-order bass system if you count the amp as an 'order'. Anyway, all speaker drivers have limits, but when the cones are aligned in this Push-Pull configuration (going the same way at the same time), then when one is all the way out of the magnetic shove of the motor, the other will be in its motor up to the hilt. This means that any inherent non-linearities in the drivers' performance will tend to be equal and opposite, making the whole bass system powerful and uncoloured. The 8in X series woofer thus claims the welly of a 12in system; the dual 10in the same area of shove as a 15in product; and the twin 12in model on test here should be like having a mighty 18in cone in play – only faster...

The front LCR speakers (there's no specific centre channel model here) are where marketing meets acoustics. In almost no images will you see the S150 MKII with its grille off, as you will then observe it wearing its vital foam pieces [*We considered it, but it makes them look, well... ugly – Ed*]. These rather prosaic-looking squares are placed between the front baffle's three tweeters, as these

drivers would otherwise interfere with each other. The three high-frequency devices together, along with the paired punchy-as-hell 5.25in mid-rangers (constructed from mineral-filled polypropylene in partnership with driver specialist Peerless) means the speaker easily exceeds the THX Ultra 2 specification it so proudly wears.

The S150T Tripole is a queer fish and I love it. It offers all the characteristics of a dipole, filling in a diffuse rear soundfield so you are drawn into a movie almost unawares, but also delivers the deeply satisfying and vital

'The twin-driver subwoofer should make the whole bass system powerful and uncoloured'

locational cues from another brace of drivers on the front drop. This Tripole design is proprietary to M&K Sound, and is meant to offer the best of the monopole/direct radiating and dipole worlds.

The S150 array is available in a Henry Ford choice of finishes and is easy to set up, although the back panel of the X12 subwoofer, which includes balanced inputs and outputs for those with compatible processors, may unnerve novices. Stands are available, as are active versions of the front speakers.

Top-end clarity

To audition this system I began with a little bit of stereo music. Immediately, the tiny detailed elements, such as brushed jazzers' cymbals, showed off the M&K Sound's absurd, effortless clarity, cut and weight of its top end. A nice beginning.

Yet surround sound is the thing we all care about, so a run-through of a DTS-HD Master Audio recording from Ronnie Scott's was in order. It, too, was lovely and rich, with little from the rears – as it was mixed that way – but truly vast in scale and revealing of the superb recording quality. Again, I wanted more than that, even though it wiped the floor with some of the hi-fi rooms I had stepped into at the Bristol Show this year.

Onto a movie soundtrack, then; and the first demo sequence was from *Open Range* ➤

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

THX Ultra 2-certified 5.1 speaker array

POSITION:

Rubbing shoulders with the 750 and 950 Series in MK Sound's THX lineup

PEERS:

Teufel System 10 THX Ultra 2; Klipsch THX Ultra2; Jamo D600 THX Ultra 2

IN TIM BURTON'S 1989 *Batman* movie, Jack Nicholson's Joker demands of his TV audience. 'Who do ya trust?' It's a question that applies in the world of home cinema, too, with many brands turning to the opinions of Hollywood and beyond to qualify the superiority of their products. SIM2, for instance, counts *The Godfather* director Francis Ford Coppola as a fan; Bowers & Wilkins loves to report that its speakers are used in Abbey Road studios. As for M&K Sound... well this is a company whose speakers were used to master the film soundtracks of the second *Star Wars* trilogy,



– Kevin Costner's critically acclaimed but often-overlooked Western. This features some astonishing gunfire sounds, bringing the authenticity of the old West to your cinema. I ramped up the volume for the climactic shootout, and quickly realised this high-end array has the power to blow you away.

It's all about teamwork

Simply put, the greater the number of motors, the less work each has to do, and with the front stage of the M&K Sound 5.1 set, you get fifteen voice coils all working away, unflustered. And with the Costner Blu-ray, the effortless foam-controlled triple-whammy tweeter systems mean the sound was

'The rears provide both tangible atmosphere and the directly-there cues of a full stereo rear soundfield'

beautifully detailed and sweet when quiet sequences were playing – such as the feet scrunching around you as the gunslingers sneak into town.

Then the first shot was fired and I was lifted clean out of my seat. The M&K Sound speakers had me in their grip – I was transported. This system is potent, with the synergy between these cabinets sufficient for THX to be a mere sugar-frosting of directional performance guarantee; power, dynamism and scale is phenomenal.

These unassuming boxes (the Tripoles are only 267mm high) lapped up the film's intricate sound design. The bullet ricochets and splintering wood were utterly believable,

M&K Sound's 'Pro Tweeter', present on the LCR and Tripole speakers, is rated to reach up to 20kHz

and the different levels and qualities of gunshots was clear as day. You could *feel* the varying calibre weapons, let alone merely hear them.

The X12 woofer drops deep (as a THX Ultra 2-certified model it has to hit 20Hz at -6dB), yet is not the real story as far as ultimate scale is concerned, for the upper registers are so fulsome and delicious. And the Tripole speaker design works a treat. The rears provide both tangible atmosphere and the directly-there cues of a full stereo rear soundfield, as well as unerring front-to-rear transitions.

I moved from the open prairie to Skull Island with Peter Jackson's *King Kong* remake. Here the M&K Sounds nailed the large crashing trees in the rear of the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix, with the Tripoles pulling off the scary '...it's behind you!' moment with aplomb. Equally impressive were the biplanes and their rat-a-tat-machine guns enveloping the Empire State Building in the movie's final act – brilliant detailing throughout the soundstage.

Dedicated delivery

So, is this for £7,500 system for you? If you're after a setup for a dedicated room, then you certainly need to give it serious consideration.

In my world, and if I had the money, I would have at least two of the subwoofers, as they are very good but I do like to really feel my explosions. That's just a minor point: in reality the system is fantastically well-balanced and just 'one-less-thing-to-worry-about' good.

Perfectly suited to movies and more than capable with music, the M&K Sound package is not about flashy looks but serious mastering-room clarity and potency. Compact, kinda costly and captivatingly clear ■

SPECIFICATIONS

M&K SOUND S150 MKII

DRIVE UNITS: 3 x 1in polymer silk dome Pro Tweeters in vertical array; 2 x 5.25in polypropylene midbass drivers
ENCLOSURE: Two-way; sealed
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 77Hz-20kHz
SENSITIVITY: 91dB
POWER HANDLING: 25-400W
DIMENSIONS: 268(w) x 318(h) x 318(d)mm
WEIGHT: 10Kg

M&K SOUND S150T

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 1in polymer silk dome Pro Tweeter; 1 x 5.25in polypropylene midbass driver; 2 x 3.25in polypropylene dipolar drivers
ENCLOSURE: Three-way; Tripole
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 80Hz-20kHz
SENSITIVITY: 85dB
POWER HANDLING: 25-200W
DIMENSIONS: 203(w) x 267(h) x 165(d)mm
WEIGHT: 4.5Kg

M&K SOUND X12 SUBWOOFER

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 12in coated paper pulp cones
ENCLOSURE: Sealed; Push-Pull configuration
FREQUENCY RESPONSE: 20Hz-200Hz
ON BOARD POWER: 400W RMS/700W peak
REMOTE CONTROL: No
DIMENSIONS: 440(w) x 660(h) x 460(d)mm
WEIGHT: 36Kg
CONNECTIONS: Paired phono sockets as L/R input (use left for mono feed); 2 x phono passthrough outputs; balanced stereo XLR inputs and outputs

HCC VERDICT



MK Sound S150 MKII THX Ultra 2.5.1

→ £7,500 Approx → www.mksoundsystem.com
 → www.geckohomecinema.com
 → Tel: 0845 262 2882

HIGHS: Able, detailed, superb performance with huge scale; Tripole speaker works well; subwoofer connectivity

LOWS: Not much to look at; centre channel could be hard to accommodate in some setups

Performance ★★★★★

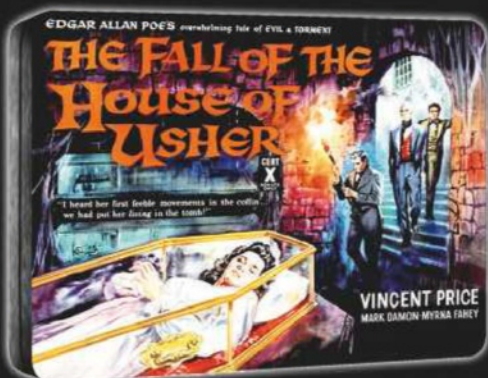
Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

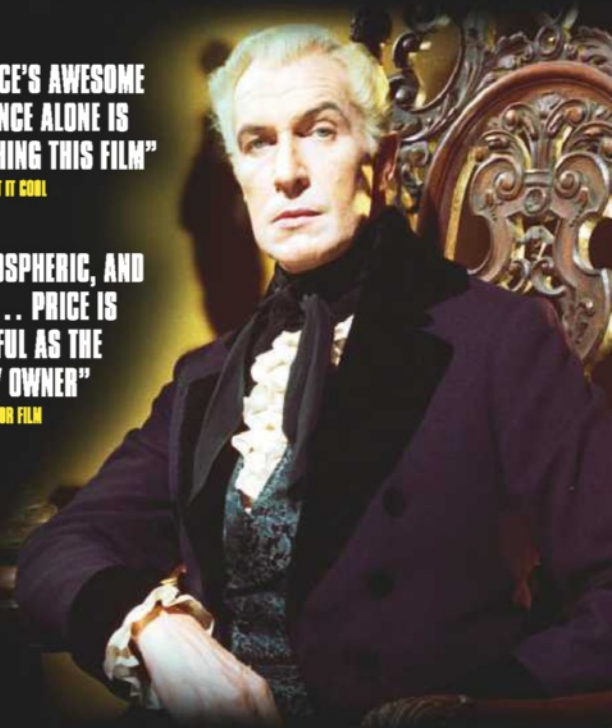
VINCENT PRICE STARS IN ROGER CORMAN'S CLASSIC ADAPTATION OF EDGAR ALLAN POE'S THE UNGOLDLY...THE EVIL...

The Fall of the House of Usher



VINCENT PRICE'S AWESOME
PERFORMANCE ALONE IS
WORTH WATCHING THIS FILM"
AM'T IT COOL

MOODY, ATMOSPHERIC, AND
EFFECTIVE... PRICE IS
WONDERFUL AS THE
SPOOKY OWNER"
EYE FOR FILM



On Blu-ray for the first time in the world, this gothic horror classic comes loaded with special features including an audio commentary by director Roger Corman, an interview with former Corman apprentice and horror expert Joe Dante, a video essay on the film in relation to the source story, an archival interview with Vincent Price, a booklet featuring new writing on the film by author Tim Lucas and an extract from Price's long out of print biography and more!

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Always bet on black

Can JVC's DLA-X75 projector really improve on the brand's already remarkable DLA-X55? **John Archer** thinks so

AV Info

PRODUCT:
High-end D-ILA projector with THX & ISF endorsement

POSITIONING:
Below the DLA-X95, above the DLA-X55

PEERS:
Sony VPL-VW95ES

Another well-designed – and backlit – clicker from JVC



WHILE WE RAPTUREOUSLY praised JVC's decision to turn its traditional D-ILA projection trio into a quartet this year when reviewing the outstanding DLA-X55 addition to the range, it occurred to us that that model's excellence potentially caused the brand a problem. In previous years the step up from JVC's entry-level projectors to the mid-range equivalents of this year's DLA-X75 was clearly defined. Now, though, you may wonder if the DLA-X75 can up the ante enough from the DLA-X55 to justify its extra £1,500 or so cost.

With this in mind, it seems sensible to try and get to grips with the key feature differences between the DLA-X55 and the DLA-X75 right from the off. A couple can be spotted just by looking at the two projectors' top edges. The DLA-X75 sports extra THX and ISF logos, revealing that it's won the independent backing of both the THX image quality assurance group and the Imaging Science Foundation calibration gang.

The THX logo means you get a couple of pre-calibrated, movie-friendly THX presets and picture quality that's essentially guaranteed to rock, while the ISF logo means you get a comprehensive suite of picture calibration tools.

Tweaks that the DLA-X75 offers over and above those of its sibling include a powerful seven-axis colour management system, a wide range of greyscale and gamma adjustments, and 10 lens memory slots, versus the DLA-X55's five. These lens memories are there so you can store different zoom and focus settings for different film aspect ratios – handy if you've got a 21:9 screen and don't want to bother with an external anamorphic lens rig.

More evidence of the DLA-X75's 'high-end' ambition can be seen in its provision of a D-Sub PC port and the way its Ethernet port enables the projector to autocalibrate itself in conjunction with a PC and (not supplied) optical sensor.

Perhaps the single most important advantage over the DLA-X55, though, is its

claimed contrast ratio of 90,000:1. The DLA-X55 offers 40,000:1.

The enormous contrast ratios I'm bandying around here are native figures. JVC's projectors can achieve them without having to manipulate the amount of light being used. Experience has proven that this allows JVC's PJs to deliver images with exceptional dynamism, shadow detail and stability.

It's good to share

Naturally, not everything about the DLA-X75 is different from the DLA-X55. Important shared features – aside from the use of D-ILA chipsets and wire grid polarisers to deliver those stunning native contrast figures – are Active 3D playback and e-Shift 2 image processing.

Despite using the 4K 'buzzword', e-Shift 2 does not make the JVC a 4K projector in the usual/true sense of the word. It doesn't carry native 3,840 x 2,160 pixel chipsets and it can't handle native 4K sources. What it does do, though, is pass images through two 1,920 x 1,080 display devices offset from each other diagonally by half a pixel, so that the resulting images have twice their native pixel density.

Like the DLA-X55, this model offers a degree of flexibility over how the e-Shift system works, enabling you to finetune the degree of sharpening impact it applies to your HD and standard-definition sources.

As with most elements of the JVC's setup and feature menus, the '4K' adjustments are presented cleanly, aside from one or two bits of jargon. In fact, despite its high level of specification the DLA-X75 is easy to get up and running, not least because of its motorised zoom, focus and horizontal/vertical lens adjustments, and the range it provides across all of these physical adjustments.

All the feature and spec improvements in the DLA-X75 will mean diddly squat, of course, if they don't lead to a noticeable improvement in picture quality. But happily they do.

The most obvious performance leap comes in the contrast department. Dark scenes like ➤



The flagship difference

The DLA-X75 is not the top model from JVC's 2013 range. That honour belongs to the DLA-X95 – which comes with a £10,000 ticket and raises questions as to just how it could be £3,000 better than the DLA-X75, especially as it doesn't really offer any extra features.

The clue to the DLA-X95's flagship appeal is found in its contrast. It ups the ratio once again, taking it to a native figure of 130,000:1. This is achieved by using optical parts hand-picked from JVC's production line that represent the purest and most refined results of the manufacturing processes.

This could sound a bit like witchcraft, but all we can do is point to the DLA-X95's images, which do indeed deliver yet another palpable jump in black level response, as well as even more colour purity and subtlety.

We can still imagine most people deciding that the DLA-X75 is good enough. But the DLA-X95 isn't designed for most people. It's intended to deliver that extra nth degree of image perfection to AV enthusiasts for whom money's no object. And in this sort of rarified atmosphere, it succeeds admirably.



Installing the DLA-X75 is aided by motorised focus and zoom functions



SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active e-Shift 2 '4K' system)
ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080 (but does feature e-Shift 2 '4K' system)
CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI; component video input; D-Sub PC port; RS-232C terminal; 12V trigger; Ethernet; 3D Sync port for external transmitter dongle
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): 1,200 ANSI Lumens
CONTRAST (CLAIMED): 90,000:1
DIMENSIONS: 455(w) x 179(h) x 472(d)mm
WEIGHT: 15.4kg
FEATURES: e-Shift 2 4K system; 3D dongle and glasses not necessarily included as standard; colour management system; white balance management; motion processing; D-ILA chipsets used; motorised zoom/focus/image shift; backlit remote

those in Gollum's caves in *The Hobbit*... exhibit levels of blackness and contrast emphatically beyond those of the DLA-X55 – and the DLA-X55 is itself uniquely accomplished in contrast terms for its price point.

The DLA-X75's deep blacks are achieved without sacrificing shadow detail – in fact, there seems to be more visible detail in the background walls of Gollum's domain than on its baby brother. It also serves up punchy

'3D material looks excellent, with huge amounts of HD detail, great depth and fluid motion handling'

whites and colours right alongside these peerless blacks, and without 'jumping' brightness levels; dark scenes remain utterly stable.

Serious film fans not afraid to setup a properly blacked-out viewing room will really feel the benefit of the DLA-X75's extra black levels over the DLA-X55 – to a degree, I suspect, that will make them feel it's well worth the extra £1,500.

Reinforcing this impression is the way this model's extra contrast and superior optical components eke out more impact from the e-Shift 2 4K system. There's a greater sense of extra image density and texture, while the improved contrast range helps you better appreciate the sense of depth and colour nuancing that e-Shift 2 can produce.

I must stress that e-Shift 2's 4K efforts don't result in pictures as detailed and immaculate as those delivered by the new generation of Ultra HD TVs. But I will argue that the DLA-X75's approach to adding more pixels to HD pictures seems more natural and less intrusive than the processing impact of even the very best upscaling systems on native

Use one of the JVC's HDMI inputs for the feed from your AVR and save the other for 'guest' hardware

4K displays. Meanwhile, going back to watching HD images on a projector without the e-Shift tech feels almost painful.

Earlier I mentioned the DLA-X75's impressive colour handling, but this warrants more discussion. Everything from the difficult and varied palette of *Casino Royale* through to the riotous colourscape of *Oz The Great and Powerful* is handled sublimely well. There's naturalism, balance and precision in abundance, as long as you're careful which of the provided presets you use.

Wrapping up a sensational picture performance is the DLA-X75's handling of 3D. Favourite stereoscopic fare such as *Avatar* and *Life of Pi* looks mostly excellent, with huge amounts of HD detail in the 3D frame; a great and natural sense of depth aided by the potent contrast range; and fluid motion handling. Best of all, there's far, far less crosstalk noise than I witnessed with last year's JVC 3D projectors.

Striving for perfection

In a perfect world the DLA-X75's pictures might look a touch brighter, and the projector would run slightly more quietly in 3D mode (which makes its lamp have to work harder). But I expect most people with £6,500 to spend on a projector will probably have the wherewithal to work round these relatively minor niggles.

For many people without limitless supplies of cash, JVC's DLA-X55 will remain the 'go to' model from the company's latest projection range. At the same time, though, the DLA-X75 offers more reasons than I'd expected for serious cinema fans to spend an extra £1,500, and certainly cements JVC's fearsome reputation as the most consistently outstanding projector brand operating in the sub-£10,000 bracket today. Grab an audition as soon as you can ■

HCC VERDICT



JVC DLA-X75

→ £6,500 Approx → www.jvc.co.uk
 → Tel: 0845 310 8000

HIGHS: Spectacular, contrast-rich picture quality; runs quietly in low lamp mode; flexible setup; e-Shift 2 works well

LOWS: Runs a bit noisily in 3D mode; 3D images aren't the brightest; the DLA-X55 pushes it hard

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Brilliance
Pure and Simple



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One box to rule 'em all

LG's do-it-all HR939M Blu-ray deck/PVR boasts a cavernous hard drive and more attractions than Alton Towers. So why isn't **Steve May** whooping for joy?

LIKE STRING CHEESE and ice pops, the disc-playing PVR is surely one of life's more practical form factors. Adopting a Swiss Army knife approach to AV is a massive space-saver, and thanks to Smart functionality also provides a convenient way for older TVs to upgrade to streaming media content.

The LG HR939M is just such a multi-talented beast. Unfortunately, as a piece of home entertainment design, it's also positively Amish. A utilitarian box with stick-on transport controls, the HR939M's only claim to glitz is a glossy, angled fascia. LG's BD hardware clearly hails from a corner of the office rarely visited by the in-house design A-team.

Rear-panel connectivity comprises an aerial loop-through, HDMI, optical digital audio

output, Ethernet and USB; a second USB is offered on the front panel. Wi-Fi is integrated. The recorder ships with a standard IR remote control; no Magic controller here.

This deck is one of three HR models. If its 1TB drive seems a bit over-the-top, you can opt for more affordable 500GB or 250GB versions. Setup takes just a few minutes, sped along by straightforward prompts. The user interface is the same as last year, but that's no bad thing. A home screen comprises an array of buttons for live TV, Movie/Photo/Music content, premium services, LG Apps and Settings, plus a shortcut to the recordings library.

As a PVR, the LG follows the perfectly civil Freeview+HD template. The EPG may be a simplistic Now and Next overlay, but you're

helpfully prompted to watch or record in HD if you land on the SD iteration of a hi-def channel (it's a shame you can't simply remap these HD channels to their SD counterparts' positions on the grid).

Recordings can be solo or series-linked. This twin-tuner deck allows you to record two channels simultaneously, and catch them while they're still recording. There's a fuel gauge which lets you know how much space you have left for recordings, both in terms of GB as well as percentage. Invariably, image quality is transparent to the original source; HD shows look extremely good, and play back without artefacts. The presentation of the recorded library is somewhat rudimentary, though, with no thumbnails offered. On the plus side, you

AV Info

PRODUCT:

Blu-ray-equipped
Freeview+HD PVR
(or vice versa)

POSITION:

The best-featured
deck in LG's BD fleet

PEERS:

Panasonic
DMR-PWT530;
Samsung BD-F8500



can avail yourself of IPTV services and catch-up while the deck is busy timeshifting.

In use, the 1TB hard drive feels positively roomy. As Freeview only offers a quartet of HD channels (BBC One and BBC Two, ITV and C4), you'll have to go some to dent the capacity. Remember, though, that the platform's HD offering may jump significantly. Freeview's top brass have indicated that an additional 10 HD channels could launch within a year or so. At this point, 1TB goes from being a luxury to a necessity.

The HR939M offers both local USB and network media playback via DLNA. File compatibility is particularly good for video, with MPEG, MOV, MKV, AVI and WMV codecs and containers supported; audio is limited to M4A (but not AAC), WAV, MP3 and WMA. Users with a large collection of such files stored on an external USB HDD can take advantage of the rear port. The deck's UI presents this second drive as a selectable option alongside the front-facing USB. While you can't record to it, it can be used as a vault.

Slow going

In Blu-ray player guise, the HR939M doesn't disappoint, at least visually. It's compatible with all the usual media, including CD and DVD, and is 3D-capable. Image quality is perfectly fine, with high levels of fine detail

on display. Unfortunately, the player is horribly sluggish to use. Loading times are tortuously slow, with the deck takes a leisurely 64s to get the Java-heavy Blu-ray of *Goldfinger* from tray to menu. *The Hobbit*... requires an equally slow 51s. Even worse, disc navigation is ponderous. Perusing the chapter selection on *The Hobbit* disc proves to be a stuttery trudge, as thumbnails begrudgingly emerge. The same procedure on (an admittedly more expensive) Oppo BDP-103EU BD player is silky smooth.

Helpfully, when you spin a CD the HR939M looks for sleeve art and info on Gracenote. You also have the option of ripping CDs either to the recorder's internal hard drive or a connected USB device. Using the deck as a media jukebox is actually a good idea. Turn on Media File Sharing in the menu and you'll be able to see the LG recorder from other DLNA devices, such as a media player or Smart TV. Music rips can then be played across multiple rooms. Unfortunately, you can't share the LG's timeshifted video recordings in the same way.

Overall, the LG HR939M can be regarded as a good-value multi-purpose box, with caveats. As a Blu-ray player it works well enough, but is slow to load and navigate. The Smart functionality is welcome, but the range of catch-up services could be better. It's a decent media player, too, and we like its multiroom music provision. Worth auditioning ■



The LG HR939M is big on features but weak on style

ON THE MENU



→ The HR939M offers a simple graphical user interface, with quick access to internet services and recorded programmes. LG doesn't ship the PVR/BD deck with its Magic Remote, though

SPECIFICATIONS

HDD: Yes. 1TB
TUNER: Yes. 2 x Freeview HD
CONNECTIONS: HDMI v1.4 output; optical audio; Ethernet; 2 x USB
DIMENSIONS: 430(w) x 50(h) x 299(d)mm
WEIGHT: 3.1kg
FEATURES: Integrated Wi-Fi with Wi-Fi direct; CD ripping; media playback from USB; DLNA streaming across a LAN; Series Link; LG Smart Hub includes BBC iPlayer, YouTube, Netflix, LoveFilm, KnowHow Movies, iConcerts, CineTrailer, Dailymotion, BlinkBox and Picasa; 2D-3D conversion; Simplink; LG Sound gallery

HCC VERDICT



LG HR939M

→ £330 Approx → www.lg.com/uk
 → Tel: 0844 847 5454

HIGHS: Versatile feature set; good Smart TV portal; network media sharing; integrated Wi-Fi; copious HDD

LOWS: Sluggish Blu-ray disc performance with slow loading speeds; anonymous design

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Spreading the love

Philips has revamped the soundbar concept to include multichannel audio by virtue of detachable speakers. An intrigued **Mark Craven** puts it to the test

PHILIPS' HTL9100 IS a neat idea.

A soundbar/subwoofer combi that incorporates two detachable battery-powered speakers, allowing you to switch from stereo to multichannel configuration just by moving them around your living room, is the kind of forward-thinking product I've come to expect from the brand behind Ambilight and 21:9 ratio TVs. But using batteries to power speaker drivers is generally thought of by the consumer electronics world as utterly bonkers, which is why nearly every pair of 'wireless' rear speakers on the market plugs into a wall-socket. Can the HTL9100 deliver a sound performance worthy of its £600 ticket?

Well, it's certainly nice to look at. As part of Philips' well-regarded Fidelio stable of audio products, the HTL9100 arrives flourishing the familiar design cues – if you like things black and silver and with a few curves, then this is the soundbar for you. The 'airfoil' design has also been chosen, says Philips, to reduce standing waves inside the cabinet. There's no such jet-set styling for the accompanying

subwoofer, though, which is a tall, unassuming black box (housing a 6.5in driver) that you'll want to install somewhere and forget about. Handily, it connects wirelessly.

The main soundbar unit packs a quartet of drivers (two 2.5in woofers and two 1in tweeters), with two additional 2.5in 'full-range' drivers attaching to each end in their own cabinet. When these are connected, they charge their Lithium polymer batteries. The maximum two-hour charge should provide around 10 hours of wireless playback. Furthermore, the batteries shut off when no signal is detected, meaning you won't run them down overnight.

Considering the number of soundbars that still ignore HDMI connectivity as if it were some sort of black magic (I'm looking at you, Sonos and Bose), the HTL9100 is particularly well-endowed. A brace of HDMI inputs are joined by an ARC-compatible HDMI output, alongside coaxial and optical digital audio jacks, a 3.5mm socket and stereo analogue phonos. There's also Bluetooth onboard,

allowing you to stream MP3s from a smartphone or tablet.

The old-fashioned way

The easiest way to use the HTL9100 is as a regular soundbar, with the two extra speakers connected to the main unit and providing a beefed-up stereo soundstage. In this configuration it delivers an admirable, though not perfect, 2.1-channel performance.

With the climactic shootout in 2008's *Rambo* (Blu-ray), the subwoofer showcases the kind of bass prowess that modern TVs just can't provide; the slams of artillery fire are accompanied by deep, thumping throbs that bring visceral energy to the onscreen mayhem. And upping the volume (the 'bar's front LED lights are your only clue here) doesn't make the HTL9100 flinch much either.

A slight criticism of the HTL900 is that it lacks a little verve and sparkle. Its overall tone leans a bit towards the bottom end for my tastes, and I couldn't rectify this with the rudimentary bass and treble adjustments.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:

Soundbar/subwoofer duo with 5.1 mode

POSITION:

Philips' best-in-breed soundbar

PEERS:

Sonos PlayBar; Yamaha YSP-2200; Bose Cinemate ISR



The HTL900's detachable speakers use a Lithium battery

That's not to say high-frequency details aren't clear – and dialogue is well-rendered – but the tweeters don't reach for the stars.

Nor is the soundstage particularly wide, and the Virtual Surround mode selectable via the remote control does nothing to improve the situation. In fact, I'd argue that it makes matters worse, adding an ethereal quality to the sonics that robs them of believability.

Thankfully, though, the Philips ups its game when the detachable speakers are used for surround channels. Give it a multichannel source (either DTS or Dolby Digital) and it automatically switches to 5.1 mode and – bingo – the narrowness of its soundstage melts away and movie material comes to life. In fact, my misgivings about battery-powered speakers were quickly dashed once I heard the first bullet zip past my right side and a mortar shell track from the rear of the soundstage to front. Sure, these aren't the most impressive of cabinets in terms of scale or tonality, but they

do their job well, and the fact you can place them anywhere is a real boon.

Compelling proposition

That the HTL9100 impresses the most in multichannel guise is hardly surprising, and if I owned it I would use it this way exclusively – with the slight annoyance of having to charge the speakers a small price to pay for an enveloping sound. There's also the welcome by-product that you can take the speaker to a nearby room for multiroom music – the Philips uses Dolby Pro-Logic to convert stereo sources to multichannel.

Of course, it could be argued that the appeal of a soundbar is that it's a bar, and that they're successful because you don't litter the room with speakers. Furthermore, £600 could buy you an amp and speaker package if you really want surround audio. Having said that, this is an innovative wire-free product that will find fans ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 2 x 2.5in bass drivers; 2 x 2.5in full-range drivers; 2 x 1in tweeters

AMPLIFICATION: 120W + 90W

CONNECTIONS: 2 x HDMI inputs; HDMI ARC-compatible output; optical digital audio input; coaxial digital audio input; 3.5mm jack; stereo analogue input

DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No

SEPARATE SUB: Yes

REMOTE CONTROL: Yes

DIMENSIONS (MAIN UNIT): 1,013(w) x 156(h) x 73(d)mm

WEIGHT (MAIN UNIT): 4.2kg

DIMENSIONS (SUBWOOFER): 200(w) x 500(h) x 200(d)mm

WEIGHT (SUBWOOFER): 4.8kg

FEATURES: Detachable left/right rear speakers with chargeable Lithium polymer battery; Dolby Digital; Dolby Pro-Logic II; DTS; Virtual Surround mode; Night Mode; Auto Volume; treble/bass adjustment; Bluetooth support; wall-mountable sound bar; automatic Smart Equalization detects orientation; SMSC 5.8GHz wireless technology to rear speakers



HCC VERDICT



Philips Fidelio HTL9100

→ £600 Approx → www.philips.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 338 04 89

HIGHS: Neat styling and design; innovative 5.1 mode; wireless subwoofer connection; weighty, detailed performance

LOWS: You need to keep charging the surround speakers; tiny LED status lights; somewhat narrow stereo sound

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Home cinema

Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D?

Choosing a home cinema system is a potential minefield that must be negotiated with great care or safely avoided by letting experts guide you. If you want to end up with a system that, as a minimum, meets your expectations in terms of picture and sound quality, reading magazine product reviews and choosing the recommendations, five-star favourites or best buys can only ever be part of the answer at best. Looking for the cheapest price and having a system delivered to your door, even with a 'knowledgeable' friend to help set it up, is a well-trodden path to disappointment.

There is a bewildering choice of components on the market today and also different ways in which components can be installed and connected together. Which sort of visual system do you go for? Projector and screen, or plasma, LCD or LED TV? 3D or non-3D? Full 1080p capability is now the only sensible choice but the appropriate source components, such as a Blu-ray player, need to be part of the equation.

The sound performance of a system is also hugely important, even more so if you will be listening to music, or music DVD's, through the same system. If so, you need an amp that approaches the performance

of a decent 2-channel hi-fi amp, which is not that easy to find. Having an amp with the right inputs for the best connectivity is essential but you will also need to decide on a 5.1 or 7.1 speaker system, passive or active sub and, crucially, where they will be sited for the best results. In short, it's complicated and very fertile ground for getting it wrong.

Achieving potential

To select a system, you could choose a collection of 'Best Buy' components in the hope that they will be a great combination. Maybe, but probably not. You could buy a pre-packaged all-in-one system from one manufacturer. This is almost certainly not the best route either, as you will miss out on enormous potential. From informal surveys conducted, it appears highly likely that the majority of home cinema systems

selected and installed on a DIY basis (that is without professional input) are performing at way below their optimum level. To compound matters, most are also ill-matched to the room in which they are installed and are, in reality, the wrong system. Without considerable knowledge or experience, high quality home cinema is not a suitable DIY activity. Our aim must be to buy a home cinema system that will provide an excellent picture quality plus an audio delivery that will match, or even better, the commercial cinema experience. It must be exciting, reliable and deliver true value for money.

“ Home cinema
so good you'll believe
you're there! ”



Selecting and installing
home cinema on a
DIY basis may leave
the system performing
at way below its
optimum level.

Confused ?

What and Where to buy

To ensure a home cinema system is right for you, where do you start? Here's an important tip ...don't start with WHAT, start with WHERE. There's only one way to give yourself the best chance of getting it right first time, and that's through a specialist AV dealer. It's possible you have preconceived ideas that put you off visiting one. Although you would welcome the advice and guidance, you don't know the technical jargon. You don't want to be talked down to. Your friend has said they only sell expensive gear and they're not interested if you don't have a big budget. They're expensive. These are just myths.

Most specialist AV dealers are running their business because, above all, home cinema is their hobby. They spend a large portion of their time comparing systems to get the best possible results. They know the component combinations which don't gel together and, conversely, they know the combinations which give the best performance within a given price range. Very importantly, they know how to get a system working to its optimum. But they all also know the system must suit you.

Buying or being sold to

There are dealers around, web based or otherwise, who will sell you anything you are willing to pay for. They may be a bit cheaper but that's all they offer. Now there's a carefully selected group of long-established specialist dealers who are totally committed to putting the customer first. Their idea of 'selling' is to discuss your requirements, offer their advice, give you the best options, then play the systems for you and allow you to be the judge. You'll probably be surprised and, almost certainly, relieved to discover how easy it is to see and hear the differences between components and between systems. You'll be able to make a clear and informed decision about what to buy.

The story doesn't end there. These shops won't abandon you once you've put your hand in your pocket. They won't leave you to set up the system you've selected as best you can. They'll install it in your home, make sure it performs to its best, and ensure you're entirely happy with the way it works. Why? Because a high proportion of these dealers' custom comes through people who have bought from them before, either directly or by recommendation. It's vital to them to get it right for you.

Getting the best deal

Unless you've got money to burn, you'll be living with your new system for years. Most of these dealers offer much longer equipment guarantees than provided by the manufacturer, a very worthwhile benefit, but it also makes it in the dealer's interest to ensure high build quality and reliability. Maybe you could save a few pounds by buying piecemeal but you'll lose out on the overall package. As far as the dealers are concerned, they believe that taking care of their customers properly is a far better way of doing business than just handing over boxes.



The Dealers listed below have been selected because they are known to do an excellent job in guiding customers towards home cinema systems that will provide years of superlative performance and total satisfaction.

Our Top20 AV shops in the country

SOUTH

Chelmsford

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

216 Moulsham Street. 01245 265245
www.rayleighhifi.com

Kingston-upon-Thames

INFIDELITY

9 High Street, Hampton Wick.
020 8943 3530
www.infidelity.co.uk

Maidenhead

AUDIO VENUE

36 Queen Street. 01628 633995
www.audiovenue.com

Norwich

MARTINS HI-FI

85-91 Ber Street. 01603 627134
www.martinshifi.co.uk

Rayleigh, Essex

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

44a High Street. 01268 779762

CUSTOM INSTALL DEPT.

01268 776932
www.rayleighhifi.com

Southend-on-Sea

RAYLEIGH HI-FI SOUND & VISION

132/4 London Road. 01702 435255
www.rayleighhifi.com

Tunbridge Wells

KENT HOME CINEMA

69 London Road, Southborough.
01892 535007
www.kenthomecinema.co.uk

LONDON

Ealing

AUDIO VENUE

27 Bond Street. 020 8567 8703
www.audiovenue.com

N1 GRAHAMS HI-FI

190a New North Road. 020 7226 5500
www.grahams.co.uk

SW11 ORANGES & LEMONS

61-63 Webbs Road, Battersea.
020 7924 2040
www.oandlhifi.co.uk

MIDLANDS

Coventry

FRANK HARVEY HI-FI EXCELLENCE

163 Spon Street. 024 7652 5200
www.frankharvey.co.uk

Nottingham

CASTLE SOUND & VISION

48/50 Maid Marian Way.
0115 9584404
www.castlesoundvision.com

Solihull

MUSIC MATTERS

93-95 Hobs Moat Road.
0121 742 0254
www.musicmatters.co.uk

NORTH

York

SOUND ORGANISATION

2 Gillygate.
01904 627108
www.soundorg.co.uk



The majority of the above dealers are members of one or both of the major trade organisations, BADA or CEDIA.

www.top20uk.info



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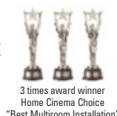
We understand Home Entertainment

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The award-winning Home Entertainment specialist

Smart system showdown

All the major manufacturers want to tempt you with their intelligent tellies. Headmaster **Steve May** surveys the class to see who gets a gold star and who gets the dunce cap



LG SMART HUB

Magic Remote and exclusive Now TV content are highlights here

PANASONIC MY HOME SCREEN

Want to customise your Smart TV experience? Look no further

PHILIPS SMART TV

A clean-looking interface that hides some dirty secrets...

SAMSUNG SMART TV

This system clearly leads the way in catch-up services

SONY ENTERTAINMENT NETWORK

Eschewing interactive control in favour of movies-on-demand

TOSHIBA CLOUD TV

Can this revamped interface put Tosh back on top?

It's a kind of Magic

Crisp and clever, there's nothing much lacking from LG's Smart TV platform...



IN THE CONTENT quantity stakes, LG gives its high street rivals a serious run for their money. Its Smart TV portal bristles with streaming IPTV, downloadable games and an astonishing assortment of appy oddities.

The LG Smart interface is crisp and easily navigated. It comprises various silo'd theme 'cards' sporting assorted selectable buttons. A live TV window keeps you connected to your chosen channel, while a secondary strip of shortcuts across the bottom of the screen simplifies navigating from one app or service to another. Interestingly, within this interface the brand doesn't really differentiate between cloud services, local features or even settings – everything is just wedged in. The idea is simply to scroll along horizontally until you get where you need to be.

The Premium content block, which sits in pole position, is where you'll find the streaming heavy-hitters; BBC iPlayer, LoveFilm Instant, Netflix, Blinkbox, YouTube and KnowHow Movies all jockey for position.

LG is also the only TV maker to offer Now TV, Sky's non-contract subscription VOD service. Now TV has been neatly integrated into the LG UI, with a dedicated menu card highlighting new release content. The interface has also been optimised for use with the brand's Bluetooth Magic Remote; a handy cursor not only makes for much more naturalistic navigation of the portal and web

browser, but adds a lot to some of the casual gameplay. While this thumb-wand takes some getting used to, it's worth mastering and adds a lot to the user experience.

LG also hosts dedicated Game World and 3D World areas, which aggregate content into a themed parking space, and there are Facebook and Twitter social apps to be had, too, alongside music services such as Napster and Deezer. LG's excellent SmartShare media player is also built directly into the Smart interface, so that you can browse rips and downloads. There's support for all key video codecs and containers, both when playing from a USB device and a networked NAS, including WMV, AVI, MKV and MOV. MP3s play back with sleeve art and are accompanied by some fancy spinning-disc graphics.

EPG woes

Disappointingly, despite the slickness of this interface, LG's TV guide is a locked down Freeview offering that lacks both picture-in-picture and channel audio. This lets the side down a bit. However, mobile connectivity is good, bolstered by Miracast Wi-Fi and NFC (Near Field Communication). Miracast mirrors the screen of a compatible smartphone on the TV; it's a great way to share content, be it JPEGs, video or a website. LG dubs its NFC implementation Tag On. Compatible TVs come with a small NFC sticker which you can

stick anywhere convenient, which when tagged/touched by an Android NFC 'phone automates a link between the two.

Overall, LG's Smart platform has much to offer. I love its ease of use and the sheer variety of content on offer, and appreciate the novelty of the brand's Magic Remote controller. And it's worth noting that there are changes afoot. The brand will roll out its On Now bolt-on, via firmware download, in September. Designed to offer quicker, more intuitive access to TV shows, it consists of a new menu card offering Catch-up TV, Movies, Favourites and For You buttons, the latter being a programme recommendation system based on viewing preferences. There may well be other enhancements; we'll just have to wait and see.

SPECIFICATIONS

CATCH UP TV SERVICES: BBC iPlayer; YouTube

MOVIE STREAMING SERVICES: Now TV; Netflix; LoveFilm Instant; Dailymotion; Blinkbox; KnowHow Movies

VOICE CONTROL: Yes

MOTION CONTROL: No

MEDIA PLAYBACK: USB file support: AVI, WMV, MKV, MP4, MOV, MP3, WMA, WAV; Network file support: MKV, AVI, MOV, MP4, WAV, MP3, WMA

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Magic Remote control; Miracast; NFC

A bespoke service

Panasonic's customisable UI isn't just Smart, it's individual



PANASONIC'S MY HOME Screen takes a uniquely personal approach to everyday TV and Smart content access. Available on all its internet-connected plasmas and LED LCD TVs, the interface is uniquely powerful.

My Home Screen takes control of your telly-watching from the outset, booting with a trio of preset interfaces, themed TV, Lifestyle and Information. Each offers a selection of curated content and apps. If you prefer, you can create your own themed pages, tailored to either your own personal interests or those of family members, and adorned with favourite VOD channels, news feeds or games. You can even upload a JPEG image to each one. This wallpaper option really typifies Panasonic's personal angle. TVs with an integrated camera can use face recognition to load the appropriate user interface.

The My Home Screen itself comprises an adjustable grid onto which apps and widgets can be arranged as you fancy. Typically this is one large content window for the live TV channel or source, plus four vertical slots and three horizontal. In truth there's not a lot of variation to be had, but then you don't need it. Adding widgets to each vacant slot is a simple click and select process.

This interface works well as a seamless gateway through to the brand's VIERA Connect portal, where there are apps and streaming IPTV services. There's a solid content offering

here, but it pales a little in comparison to key rivals. Catch-up is limited to BBC iPlayer, although YouTube, Dailymotion, iConcerts, Aupeo and subscription VOD service Netflix provide diversions. You'll also find Euronews and Eurosport Player alongside CNBC Real Time, BBC News and BBC Sport. Panasonic also has exclusive access to the relaunched MySpace portal, which is now a music platform.

Voice interaction is provided, although its implementation is somewhat different to that from rival Samsung. Speaking into the brand's Touch Pad controller, supplied with its higher-end screens, or alternatively using a Panasonic app, you can communicate via preset keywords, change volume and channel and recite URLs. You can also browse the internet and Skype video chat. There is scattered provision for integrated Skype cameras across the Panasonic range, so if this is important shop carefully (oddly, Panasonic's top-flight ZT65 plasma doesn't have a built-in cam).

Panasonic's gaming options largely consist of disposable fare such as Family Reversi and Put Three, plus a slightly better selection under the PlayJam umbrella.

Effective interface

While My Home Screen sounds kind of cutesy, in use it's extremely effective. Enthusiasts can design a content grid which puts all key sources within clickable range. BBC iPlayer and

SPECIFICATIONS

CATCH UP TV SERVICES: BBC iPlayer; YouTube

MOVIE STREAMING SERVICES: Netflix; Dailymotion

VOICE CONTROL: Yes (ZT, GT, VT, ST, WT, DT, FT models)

MOTION CONTROL: Yes

MEDIA PLAYBACK: USB file support: WMV, MPEG, MKV, AVI, MPG4, AAC, FLAC, WAV, MP3, WMA; Network file support: MOV, AVI, MPEG, XviD, WMA, AAC, FLAC, M4A

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Bluetooth Touch Pad controller; Swipe & Share content sharing

Netflix can be joined by shortcuts for both the TV's network media server and the local USB media player, which means you don't need to embark on a protracted source search to find any file-filled NAS on your home network. Everything is in one place; no extraneous scrolling or menu mashing required.

For the non-techy members of a household, who know that there's a seemingly endless array of content available but can't remember just how to access it (a more common situation than you might imagine) this facility can be transformational. VOD becomes just as easy to find as any broadcast channel. Of course, you don't have to have the launch screen as the turn-on default (although it's how it's originally configured), as you can elect to launch with no My Home Screen at all.

Doing it differently

Adult content and Ambilight integration shows that Philips is going its own way



PHILIPS TELLY MAKER TP Vision is the first to admit that its online Smart portal isn't quite the Mensa playground offered by rival high-street brands. UK MD Graham Speake candidly told *HCC*: 'We're playing in a Smart TV space, but I'm the first to acknowledge that we don't have the widest selection of online services. We know we need to grow when it comes to IPTV, but we also know a lot of people are already connecting with other devices.' He does believe, though, that the brand's user interface is well liked, and maintains that the USPs still give the marque an edge.

Philips actually has a Smart TV partnership with Sharp, Loewe and LG, and shares a common Smart platform which allows content developers to cost-effectively create apps to run across all hardware using established web standards such as CE-HTML and HbbTV. This doesn't mean, however, that 'net TV services on a Philips need to look like those on a Sharp and vice versa. They can still be individualistic.

The user interface favoured by Philips for 2013 is clean and attractive, split horizontally with a live TV window and app promo guff on top, and content services below. The number of top-line streaming services is limited (this is no place for copious catch-up) but you do get BBC iPlayer, YouTube, Blinkbox, Viewster, Netflix and iConcerts. There's some social media offerings in the shape of Picasa and

Facebook too, plus news (CNBC Real Time, Euronews and Meteonews), internet radio and casual games from Funspot. This little lot can be supplemented with additional service downloads from the Philips Apps Market. It's here, incidentally, that you'll find an astonishingly high quota of streaming adult media, including channels from XXX brands Brazzers, Private, Forno and Hustler.

While access to these salacious services can be age-restricted, such protection is easy to circumvent and just browsing the sleeve art will give parents palpitations: *Gazungas 2* and *UFC* (no fighting involved) are some of the more sedate titillations on offer. Of more practical benefit is a web browser, made far more usable than most thanks to the provision of an ingenious flippable remote handset which incorporates a QWERTY keyboard.

Broad file support

Philips Smart screens offer broad multimedia support as part of their Smart functionality, with most file types playable. Across a network from a LAN and from USB we successfully played AVI, MKV, MOV, MP4, WMV and MPEG video files, along with AAC/M4A, WAV and MP3 audio.

Of course, Philips will argue that there's more to a Smart television than just streaming content and disposable games. It'll point out that Smart functionality can extend beyond

SPECIFICATIONS

CATCH UP TV SERVICES: BBC iPlayer; YouTube

MOVIE STREAMING SERVICES: Netflix; Blinkbox; Viewster

VOICE CONTROL: No

MOTION CONTROL: No

MEDIA PLAYBACK: USB file support: WMV, MKV, AVI, MP4, MOV, MP4, MP3, AIF, M4A, WAV, WMA; Network file support: MPEG.TS, MKV, AVI, MOV, MP4, AAC/M4A, FLAC, WMA

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Smart LED light integration

the widescreen confines of the set, and it's right, of course. Rather cleverly, the brand has developed a unique 'Ambilight+hue' app for Android and iOS smart devices that brings the Ambilight smart lighting technology made famous by Philips TVs into the same universe as its Hue intelligent LED lighting system. By coordinating Ambilight with a deployment of Hue LED lamps in the living space, the entire room can pulse in coloured sympathy to what's happening onscreen. The Ambilight+hue feature is supported by all Ambilight Philips TVs from 2011 onwards.

If access to internet TV services was a prime reason to upgrade to a Smart telly, Philips wouldn't be our first choice. But the brand's inventive approach to a wider functionality goes quite a way to making up for a shortage of streaming content.



Growing numbers of professional home cinema installers in the UK are turning to Starscape for fibre optic and LED solutions, not to mention our professional customers in Belgium, Switzerland, Portugal, South Africa, the Czech Republic and South Africa.

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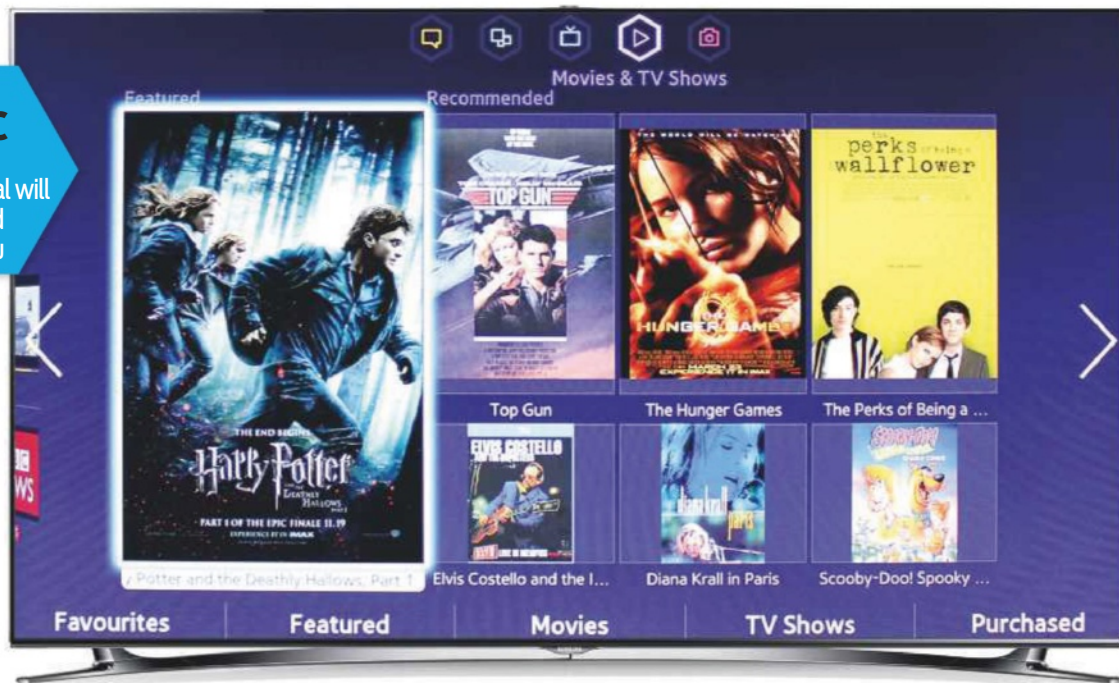
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MOVIE MANIAC

Samsung's Smart portal will recommend films for you



NO OTHER TV brand provides as much 'net-connected TV and Smart functionality as Samsung. The TV market leader is the only brand able to offer a full complement of mainstream catch-up (BBC iPlayer, ITV Player, Demand 5 and 4OD), and that's just the tip of the iceberg. Movie fans are particularly spoilt for choice, with offerings from KnowHow Movies, LoveFilm Instant, Netflix, Blinkbox, BFI Player, Vimeo, YouTube, Dailymotion and Curzon on Demand all vying for attention. The latter is particularly interesting as it offers select new-release indie movies at the same time as they screen in Curzon theatres. The Samsung platform even offers a range of TV shows and movies from (mainly) Asia in the form of Viki, a must for fans of world cinema.

Music lovers get their kicks from Spotify, Deezer, Ministry of Sound, vTuner or Muzu.TV. There are also dedicated kids and fitness zones. 3D content is grouped together beneath an Explore 3D button, and there's the usual social media clients as well as Skype. An open web client is provided that comfortably browses most popular websites.

As with its rivals, you'll find a fair number of casual games available for download. While many are barely worth the silicon they occupy, there are some exceptions, including a TV-optimised *Angry Birds*.

The problem when you offer so much more IPTV and content than anyone else is knowing

just how to make it all manageable. This year Samsung is trying an Icon driven approach (Apps, Movies & TV Shows, Photos etc). It's a sensible enough solution but the navigation can still be a little disorientating. The On TV button presents you with a jumble of thumbnails from seemingly random channels.

In addition to sprucing up its portal with fancy graphics, Samsung's 2013 Smart screens proffer an S-Recommendation engine, which makes viewing suggestions based on your monitored content preferences. The idea is the longer you use it the more effective it becomes. Of course, this could also be considered another example of over-zealous curation.

Dying to download

Any minor carps about media mollycoddling have to be balanced by plaudits for its multimedia interaction, which is outstanding. Downloaders will love Samsung. The Smart platform can playback virtually any file you're likely to ask of it, be it from USB or across a LAN. Indeed, it's the first TV I've been able to play DXD and Ape audio files! The visual presentation is slick, too, with video thumbnails and album art when provided.

An important part of Samsung Smart TV's inherent cleverness is the Smart Evolution kit. All step-up screens have a compartment on the rear where you can slot in a new board to upgrade processing power and graphical grunt

SPECIFICATIONS

CATCH UP TV SERVICES: BBC iPlayer; ITV Player; Demand 5; 4OD; YouTube

MOVIE STREAMING SERVICES: KnowHow Movies; LoveFilm Instant; Netflix; Blinkbox; BFI Player; Curzon on Demand

VOICE CONTROL: Yes (F8000, F7000, F6000 models)

MOTION CONTROL: Yes (F8000, F7000)

MEDIA PLAYBACK: USB file support: AVI, WMV, MOV, MKV, DXD, AAC, APE, WAV, FLAC, WMA; Network file support: AVI, MPEG, MOV, MKV, DXD, WAV, FLAC, MP3

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Miracast/Smart mirroring; Dual View

as and when required. For example, an Evolution pack for last year's Samsung Series 7, 8 and 9 series brings them up to speed with this year's F8000 flagship, new smart UI and all. It's a uniquely futureproof feature.

Not that today's Samsung Smart screens are lacking in processing speed – the brawnier models employ a quad core processor, which rattles through navigation and interaction.

Samsung's interface also impresses with its Android smartphone integration. Smart Mirroring, aka Miracast, enables direct pairing between your mobile phone and the TV. You can also watch channels streamed from the TV's second tuner directly on your device, using a function dubbed Dual View. This transpires to be a seductive, addictive feature...

In need of a spring clean

When it comes to streaming content, Sony has plenty. Mind the dust, though...



SONY HAS CHOSEN to integrate its Smart TV functionality into the main user interface of its 2013 screens. Rather than draw attention to the platform, or offer any personalisation, services have largely been assimilated into the set's vertical menus, under the rather unexciting tag of Applications (you can't miss it, it's under 'TV' and on top of 'Connected Devices' – Sony really knows how to sell those features, eh?). For casual users this may not be a bad thing, as it greatly simplifies usage, but online service junkies may feel a tad unloved. This approach also divorces the TV's file playback functionality from IP content and Twitter/Skype embellishments. Incidentally, if you want to avail yourself of Skype, you'll need to invest in an optional Skype camera. Sony doesn't build an all-seeing eye into its TV fleet.

While navigation can seem a little confusing, as there are several ways to achieve the same result, users will soon get the gist of things. The main SEN (Sony Entertainment Network) interface is a scrolling block affair, six across, that looks somewhat utilitarian. The brand gives pride of place to its own Movies Unlimited video rental and purchase store, and Spotify rival Music Unlimited. As a cloud film rental proposition, Movies Unlimited has a lot going for it. The selection of titles, not just from Sony Pictures, but all the Hollywood majors, is first-rate and the quality of HD can be extremely good (it's adaptive, depending on

the quality of your broadband connection). Both music and movie services can be enjoyed across a variety of Sony platforms, from TV to PS3 and Xperia mobile devices.

Catch-up is limited to the BBC iPlayer and Demand 5 (there's no ITV Player or 4OD), but you do get Netflix, LoveFilm Instant, YouTube, Dailymotion, Blinkbox, arthouse subscription service Mubi and the Berliner Philharmoniker. Sky News is also joined by BBC News and BBC Sports for those who like their newsy stuff, then there's the ad-supported movie and obscure TV outlet Crackle and Sony Entertainment Television. The latter is a misnomer if ever there was one. Sony's own IPTV effort here is exceptionally lame with precious little content – and what is available has been gathering dust since its launch.

Unlike big-brand rivals, Sony has long embraced a linear approach to online content, but it's trying hard to get back into the app game by striking up an alliance with browser specialist Opera. The Opera store is where you'll find extra apps and casual games.

Other IPTV content includes MuzuTV, Euronews, Qello, YuppTV, Green TV, Billabong and Style.com.

Innovative integration

Where Sony has been successful is integrating Smart apps. Miracast content-sharing is a welcome addition, with NFC (Near Field

Communication) chipperly built into a second Bluetooth remote control optimised for the brand's Xperia smartphones. Sony has also developed a funky TV Sideview app which augments the basic TV EPG.

While there's plenty to admire about Sony's approach to Smart TV, it's disappointing to realise so very little has been done to expand the connected proposition over the past two years. We think it's something of a missed opportunity. Overall, the Sony Entertainment Network offers plenty but disappoints because much of the content appears moribund. Tinkering with cosmetics is all well and good, but when you're chasing your streaming TV rivals you really need to keep up with their catch-up.

SPECIFICATIONS

CATCH UP TV SERVICES: BBC iPlayer; Demand 5; YouTube

MOVIE STREAMING SERVICES: Movies Unlimited; Netflix; Dailymotion; Blinkbox; Mubi

VOICE CONTROL: No

MOTION CONTROL: No

MEDIA PLAYBACK: USB file support: MKV, AVI, WMV, MPEG, MOV, MKV, MP3 and WMA; Network file support: MKV, AVI, WMV, MPEG, MOV, MKV, MP3 and WMA

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Bluetooth One Touch NFC controller; Miracast; TV Sideview app; the Berliner Philharmoniker

A step in the right direction

But Toshiba's Smart crew still has plenty of work to do – including a bit of censorship...

CHANGE OF TACK

The Places UI has been replaced by a new-look Cloud Portal



TOSHIBA HAS TRADITIONALLY taken a social approach to the Smart TV Interface, although not always entirely successfully. The concept behind the brand's Places portal was wildly ambitious, but ended up being little more than a barren big idea. Without real content, destination portals don't work, and it transpired that no one actually wanted to use their TV as a social hub anyway. There's a vestige of that approach lurking within Toshiba's new Cloud portal, but overall this new platform is a step in a better direction.

The main dashboard is built around a Twitter feed and a PIP window for live TV. The Twitter input is rather clever in that it utilises an algorithm which delivers trending tweets about TV content; while watching a rerun of *Only Fools and Horses*, tweets about the show suddenly flooded the screen. Sometime thereafter the top topic of Twitter conversation transpired to be *The Simpsons*, and so on. When you select the Tweet window, it takes you to a larger PIP with a Twitter sidebar.

Unfortunately, there are significant dangers to hanging your Smart portal on an uncontrollable Twitter feed. Most significantly, it turns the entire user interface into a spoiler zone. Timeshifted the final of *The Apprentice*? You might be saving the result for later, but this TV will have no qualms about gushing out tweets regarding the winner. There's no expletive deleter either – and people really say

the rudest of things during the most innocuous of shows. Parents be wary...

Hop over to premium apps and you'll find a fair selection of content, including Netflix, iPlayer, Blinkbox, YouTube, Viewster, Vimeo, Dailymotion and KnowHow Movies. Most obviously, there's a deficiency in catch-up, and there's only so far you can go with iConcerts, Deezer, Woomi, BBC news and Livesport.TV. On the plus side, you do get a web browser, plus Skype if you employ an optional webcam.

Slow going

Unfortunately, the portal, tested on a Toshiba L7 series TV, proved a chore to use. The reaction time twixt remote and screen often led me to think that no one was home.

You're encouraged to stream your own content from within the Cloud portal. Video file support is fair (MKV, AVI and MOV), although navigation is slow. Using the TV to browse the NAS on my test network seemed only marginally swifter than sending a manned mission to Mars. Inexplicably, no audio formats at all are supported across a network; even humble MP3s refused to play from a NAS, a terse 'Audio format not supported' message being the only response. Perhaps a firmware update will resolve this situation, as it can't possibly be allowed to stand.

I had more luck with the USB media player. A wide selection of codecs and containers are

playable, including MKV, WMV, MOV, AVI, MP4, M4A/AAC, WAV, WMA and MP3. The lack of any attempt at presentation is a bit disappointing, though; the screen simply goes into a screensaver mode, shuffling the track title around the panel while it plays. Curiously, it wasn't possible to launch the Cloud service immediately after turning the set on, either. The system loads slowly in the background before it becomes accessible.

Clearly there's work to be done yet with Toshiba's new platform before it can be considered a serious competitor to its rivals. Slow and uncooperative, just using it takes a lot of the fun out of internet interaction – at least on the first screen sporting it that we looked at. Maybe a TV with a more powerful processor will make a better fist of it?

SPECIFICATIONS

CATCH UP TV SERVICES: BBC iPlayer; YouTube

MOVIE STREAMING SERVICES: Netflix; Dailymotion; Blinkbox; KnowHow Movies; Viewster; Vimeo

VOICE CONTROL: No
MOTION CONTROL: No

MEDIA PLAYBACK: USB file support: MKV, WMV, MOV, AVI, MP4, MP3, m4a, WAV, AAC, WMA; Network file support: MKV, AVI, MOV

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Wi-Di; PIP/Twitter interface

Final standings

ONCE YOU'VE TAKEN your TV online there's no going back. The Smart revolution brings all manner of functionality and the user experience is truly transformational. You'll wonder why you bother watching BBC iPlayer on a laptop, and having a multiplicity of streaming video services on tap could have you reconsidering your all-you-can-eat cable or satellite subscription service. But which brand has the best platform?

WELL, TOSHIBA'S NEW Cloud TV portal is certainly an improvement on its previous Places effort but, from our first audition, it's slow and clunky to use, with only a modest selection of IPTV by way of compensation – and network file support is woeful. It needs updating.

The Sony Entertainment Network isn't short of content, with most key service providers onboard. However, little appears to have been done with it over the past 18 months. Rivals have revamped and expanded, while SEN has trod water.

The inspired integration of Ambilight with its Hue Smart LED lighting tech makes Philips' system stand out. Admittedly, this is a very different interpretation of Smart technology, but one that's undeniably innovative. It's also a nice UI to browse.

While Panasonic doesn't offer the same volume of content as its key rivals, we're mighty partial to its My Home Screen. No other TV brand offers quite such an elegant connected TV solution. More catchup services would be welcome, though.

In sheer content terms, Samsung's Smart TV portal is a winner. The UI may occasionally be a bit of a jumble, but when you factor in its comprehensive catch-up selection and wall of services, the package is formidable. It's a Smart platform with an Einstein complex.

LG's system is equally impressive. The variety and scope of its streaming services and assorted diversions is unquestionable, and the user experience, enhanced by the Magic Remote control and NFC, is first-rate. Joint winners, then! ■



HCC VERDICT

LG Smart Hub

→ www.lg.com/uk

→ Tel: 0844 847 5454

HIGHS: Well designed UI; wide range of streaming IPTV and VOD; exclusive

Now TV access

LOWS: Could do with more comprehensive catch-up

Content ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



HCC VERDICT

Panasonic My Home Screen

→ www.panasonic.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 844 3899

HIGHS: Uniquely customisable interface; suitable for multiple users; personal wallpapers

LOWS: Short on catch-up services; file support could be more comprehensive

Content ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



HCC VERDICT

Philips Smart TV

→ www.philips.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 338 04 88

HIGHS: Approachable interface; hue LED lighting integration; keyboard remote control

LOWS: Limited selection of streaming TV services; adult movies may offend!

Content ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



HCC VERDICT

Samsung Smart TV

→ www.samsung.co.uk

→ Tel: 0330 7267864

HIGHS: Full set of catch-up TV services; Smart Evolution upgrade kit; excellent file support

LOWS: The UI can look untidy; voice and gesture control is hit and miss

Content ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



HCC VERDICT

Sony Entertainment Network

→ www.sony.co.uk

→ Tel: 0844 736 0595

HIGHS: Solid range of streaming services; NFC-enabled remote

LOWS: Missing key catch-up services; some content apps haven't changed much in years; utilitarian interface

Content ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



HCC VERDICT

Toshiba Cloud TV

→ www.toshiba.com

→ Tel: 0844 856 0730

HIGHS: Fair selection of video-on-demand services

LOWS: Twitter integration can become a spoiler zone; sluggish to use; poor network file performance

Content ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

Traditional timeshifter

Sagemcom's 500GB PVR introduces media streaming to its product philosophy but, says **Martin Pipe**, it still feels a little conservative compared to the competition



SAGEMCOM'S RTI95-500 PVR is somewhat on the small side. But size deceives; the power supply is off-board, while storage takes the form of a 2.5in 500GB HDD that can accommodate over 150 hours of HD programming. It's all packaged in a nicely-styled black box, fronted with basic controls and a green four-digit display that relays channel number and operational status.

A first-time wizard takes you through installation, but a settings menu allows you to make changes (retunes or AV configuration) if needed. One handy feature should be lip-sync correction; however, as no picture is available during adjustment it's hard to gauge any effect.

The RTI95-500's twin-tuners enable you to simultaneously record up to two programmes while one is being viewed, and a picture-in-picture feature lets you monitor both channels. The hard drive also facilitates timeshifting with playback speeds of up to 64x.

Programmes are scheduled via an 8-day EPG, an icon on the programme's entry confirming that recording will take place. Captured programmes are a couple of handset button-clicks away, sitting in a library

that you'll find in a menu option called MyTV. Recordings can be organised into folders, but as disk space runs out you'll discover no means of getting them out of the box – unless you have an external recorder with composite, RGB or S-video input (a single Scart covers all bases). The only

other video output is a 1080p-capable HDMI port.

There's a USB port on the front panel, but you can't copy recordings to a storage device. It's only used for software upgrades and local media playback – another MyTV option. You can also access audio, video or still-image content held on DLNA servers courtesy of the Sagemcom's Ethernet connectivity. MKV files are incompatible, although DivX/XviD, MP3, JPEG photos, MP4 and WMV are all supported.

The settings menu gives you no control over refresh rate, and so 60Hz content is converted into 50Hz with obvious motion judder. It's rather flaky, and on occasions the feature would crash the unit even when playing USB content. Indeed, crashes occurred more often than I would have liked. Sagemcom says it's continually refining the firmware, which should hopefully provide a solution.

The final MyTV option is catch-up TV. Only BBC iPlayer is currently available, but at least its 720p HD streams look very good. Indeed, the same is true of HD broadcasts. Pin-sharp detail and beautifully vibrant colours characterise what you can expect. SD content also fares well overall, although the lower bitrates of the budget channels reveal obvious artefacting.

Lacking the pioneer spirit

The RTI95-500 is capable of a solid AV performance and offers a decent range of features. The media player is an excellent idea, and I hope that Sagemcom can address its limitations – and those occasional crashes – via firmware updates. Yet the world of Freeview PVRs is moving fast, and this is just not as adventurous (especially in terms of IPTV) as machines from the likes of Pure and Panasonic. Its affordability is welcome, though ■

SPECIFICATIONS

HDD: Yes, 500GB

TUNER: Yes, 2 x Freeview HD

CONNECTIONS: HDMI v1.3; Scart (RGB/composite or S-video); coaxial digital audio; stereo analogue phono; Ethernet; USB

DIMENSIONS: 260(w) x 48(h) x 160(d)mm

WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 0.8kg

FEATURES: 8-day EPG with series link; DLNA and USB multimedia playback; record two channels simultaneously; picture-in-picture; favourite channels list; parental control; BBC iPlayer; audio description; teletext; subtitles; 1080p HDMI output mode; AAC HD soundtracks internally-transcoded into DTS for external AV gear; lip-sync correction

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Freeview+ HD PVR with media player

POSITION: Tops the Sagemcom Freeview+ range – a 320GB version is also available

PEERS: Humax HDR-Fox T2; Panasonic DMR-HWT130

HCC VERDICT

Sagemcom RTI95-500

→ £160 Approx → www.sagemcomdigital.co.uk → Tel: 0845 090 031

HIGHS: Excellent sound and picture quality; small size makes it good for second room use

LOWS: Media player cannot handle MKV files; crashed occasionally during tests; no archiving to external storage device; limited IPTV provision

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

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Code PU513L £239.00

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Code DAC £39.00

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Code GV821 £265.00

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Code IPMSW1 £119.99

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Code HDCVC £69.00

HDMI Distribution Amplifiers

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Code HDC12 1 HDMI input to 2 HDMI outputs

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Code HDC14 1 HDMI input to 4 HDMI outputs

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Code HDC18 1 HDMI input to 8 HDMI outputs

£114.99



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Code VGAHDMIP

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Nearly a perfect Harmony

This touchscreen universal remote exudes style and boasts some superb features, but **Adrian Justins** finds a couple of flaws that need rectifying before it warrants its Ultimate tag

UNIVERSAL REMOTES HAVE

taken a battering from smartphone/tablet apps but there's no substitute for a dedicated handset. The Harmony Ultimate is a combination of the Harmony Touch remote and a separate hub that sits in a stand, adjacent to your kit. The benefits of the hub (pictured far right) are two-fold: it can control kit hidden from view in a cabinet and works in conjunction with both the handset and/or app. The hub receives RF signals from the handset as well as commands sent over Wi-Fi from the Harmony app. These are then passed on to your kit using a built-in IR transmitter and two IR blasters.

The handset fits well in the palm and has neat buttonry and a beautifully clear 2.4in OLED screen. Battery life is sufficient for a

few days but it's best to store the remote in its charger base. Operation is by a combination of touchscreen commands and traditional physical buttons. Some of the latter are replicated on the touchscreen, which reacts to finger pressure with a small but reassuring vibration.



The home screen has activity panes for watching TV, watching a movie or listening to music. Each activity automatically switches on the appropriate kit and sets the correct inputs. Supplementary devices such as media streamers can be accessed through the menu system. Swiping the home screen accesses favourite channels (in my case from Sky's EPG), with a grid of nine icons. Some channel logos are too small to read but most are obvious or guessable. Other screens vary according to the device selected. The favourites screen and home screen can be accessed if needed via dedicated buttons.

The Harmony Ultimate works well and is a pleasure to use. However, effective operation relies on faultless setup, which isn't the case here. You take control by making a USB hookup and logging in to the Harmony website. Fussiness about browsers is annoying, as was the Finlux TV reviewed in this issue not being listed and the remote failing to learn some commands. The biggest issue, however, was that you can, in theory, edit favourite channels by dragging and dropping icons but it's impossible to see which channels are which because of the small icons. Also, many channels, including Sky Atlantic, are listed but don't have icons in the setup window, so don't appear. Logitech must get this fixed soon, as it's a blemish on an otherwise excellent device ■

SPECIFICATIONS

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS: PC running Windows XP, Vista, 7 or 8 with USB port; Apple Mac with Mac OSX 10.4.8 or later with USB port
FEATURES: 2.4in colour touchscreen; Logitech Harmony App for Apple and Android devices; ships with charging station and Harmony Hub; compatible with Philips Hue; 2 x IR blasters; online setup; control up to 15 devices; customisable interface; Favourite channel list

HCC VERDICT



Logitech Harmony Ultimate

→ £230 Approx → www.logitech.com

→ Tel: 01753 870 900

HIGHS: Slick combination of physical keys and touchscreen; nice size and ergonomics

LOWS: Browser issues when setting up; Favourites function issues need resolving

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Universal remote control

POSITION:
Flagship product in a range of four remotes

PEERS:
Philips Prestige SRT9320;
One For All XSight Touch

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Big size, small price

With some 55in LED TVs retailing for £2,500, Finlux's £1,000 flagship immediately seems like a bit of a bargain. [Adrian Justins](#) goes in search of cut corners

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
55in Smart
LED-lit LCD screen

POSITION:
Top dog amongst
a range of 31 models

PEERS:
Philips 55PFL6007;
Samsung
UE55F6510

FINLUX IS A brand name that's been around the houses during its lifetime and after a somewhat dormant period during the last decade now rests in the hands of Europe's most prolific manufacturer of TV screens, Turkey-based Vestel. The company recently told HCC that its strategy of offering value for money and striving to deliver a high standard of customer service was paying dividends. Of the budget marques, it's certainly the best-known.

After a slew of popular big-boned screens the 55S9100-T represents Finlux's first model with a so-called frameless design. Now Finlux is no more guilty than nearly every other manufacturer in saying that a frame is not a frame, but to claim the 55S9100-T is

frameless is like saying Phil Spector has a crew cut. Its frame is actually thicker than most, with a 5mm-wide outer edge (made of silver-coloured plastic), surrounding a 1cm wide black frame and a 3mm inlay before you reach the picture's edge. The jutting-out Finlux logo along the bottom edge is an aesthetic blot, and the chunky black and silver industrial stand which comes with the screen is a bit of an eyesore, too.

A grand design

It may be churlish to complain too much about the Finlux's styling when you consider the price is a mere £1,000, and in its favour the screen has very low reflectivity. The socketry provision is also reasonable, including four HDMI's,

component video, a subwoofer out, headphone jack and two USBs, one of which can be used for PVR recordings. There's an Ethernet port, too, and a Wi-Fi dongle is bundled with the set.

The 55S9100-T is not exactly overflowing with enthusiast-level features, with basic edge-lit LED dimming, a 100Hz refresh rate and rudimentary picture processing options. – there are no judder-reducing frame insertion modes here. Weirdly, the bog-standard brightness, contrast, etc, tweaks have an adjustment scale between 0 and 63. On the other hand there's a decent range of preset picture settings, and the sound options include six audio EQ options plus a user-adjustable one.

'The 55S9100-T is Finlux's flagship TV, and its first model with a so-called frameless design'

This set has Smart ambitions, but using it for DLNA networking and USB media browsing reveals a few niggles. Folders aren't recognised during USB playback but they are over a network, and file compatibility is perfunctory, with no WMA or FLAC recognition and unreliable MKV playback. However, material is listed clearly and it's easy enough to scroll through and select.

Finlux's Smart TV hub is an area of little excitement, and one that compares unfavourably to those of its big-brand rivals. Skype, Twitter and Facebook are the social media highlights of a 15-strong portal that's bereft of any meaningful video-on-demand apps, save for BBC iPlayer and YouTube. The layout is quite pleasant, with a sizeable window showing the live TV broadcast, and icons can be moved around to your preference. Video apps load quickly enough and playback is stable but the TV was reluctant to load some Flickr galleries.

The 55S9100-T comes with two remotes: a palm-sized one for making a few basic

changes and a traditional full-size handset that proves Finlux has certainly got a grip on one aspect of TV design. This latter remote is elegantly designed with clearly labelled keys that click reassuringly. The layout is good and includes handy buttons for direct access to the set's media browser, Smart TV services and YouTube.

A third remote option exists in the guise of an iOS app for iPhones and iPads. It's a natty affair that even includes motion sensors.

Contemporary GUI

The good design work continues with the user interface, which features a bold, legible blend of contemporary fonts and icons. The home page packs links to picture and sound settings the EPG and the media browser. There's no need to hunt around as everything is logically located in the right sub-menu.

In use the 55S9100-T was quite tardy at powering up and took a second or two to change sources, with sound stuttering in behind the picture. More importantly, its picture performance proves to be rather average. Off-axis viewing holds up well and with negligible LED clouding the set engineers decent Freeview pictures in terms of contrast and colour fidelity, but even the HD channels are on the soft side and the panel's most obvious weakness is it simply doesn't have the clarity of a really good 55in screen.

Dramas on Sky HD such as *Banshee* and my Blu-ray copy of *Super 8* display therefore lack sharpness – fine detailing doesn't shine through as I know it should. Additionally, shadow details fall victim of the Finlux's crushed blacks, making it difficult to discern the train against the night sky as it crashes in J.J. Abrams' sci-fi thriller.

Poorer-quality sources suffer, too; football on ITV appears murky and unrefined, although judder and blur are about tolerable.

The Finlux is supplied with eight pairs of Passive 3D spex, ideal for stereoscopic parties, but its performance limitations are equally relevant here. The resolution-sapping nature of Passive technology combines with the panel's slightly soft presentation to create 3D images that, while boasting depth and brightness, are short of definition.

Sonically, the TV also shows its budget roots. Despite the multiple sound modes and tweaks available it's hard to get past both its absence of bass and thinness in the upper registers. It's fine for uncritical viewing, though.

Overall, the Finlux 55S9100-T does well in some aspects – connectivity, user interface – but not well enough to overcome the general lack of punch to its pictures and sound. The appealing price tag mitigates against this to a certain extent, but potential buyers may want to hunt around for rival 55in LED models that have seen their tickets reduced. It's still a bargain, but not an unqualified one ■

ON THE MENU



→ Finlux's UI employs translucent icons, and the Smart TV portal is neatly arranged with a live TV PiP window. However, the cleanliness of the design is made all the more easier by the set's relative lack of Smart content

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Passive
ULTRA HD: No. 1,920 x 1,080
TUNER: Yes. Freeview HD
CONNECTIONS: 4 x HDMI; component input; 3.5mm AV in (composite/stereo audio); 2 x USB; 2 x Scart; VGA; digital optical audio output; stereo audio phono input; headphone jack; Ethernet; CI slot
SOUND: 24W
BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED): N/A
CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED): N/A
DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND): 1,249(w) x 731(h) x 36(d)mm
WEIGHT (OFF STAND): 20kg
FEATURES: DLNA; Wi-Fi via USB dongle (supplied); USB media playback; 100Hz refresh rate; internet browser; Natural, Cinema, Game, Sports and Dynamic picture presets; Music, Movie, Speech, Flat, Classical and User sound modes; Smart TV apps including BBC iPlayer, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Viewster, Dailymotion, Red Bull World, Cinetrailer, Flickr, Accu Weather and Play Jam; iOS Touchscreen App; PVR function; eight pairs of 3D glasses

HCC VERDICT



Finlux 55S9100-T

→ £1,000 Approx → www.finluxdirect.com

→ Tel: 0845 459 5282

HIGHS: Slick user interface; low price; good off-axis viewing

LOWS: General lack of clarity; noisy pictures; average sonics; perfunctory media playback

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

The Finlux claims a 'frameless' design, but still feels a little chunky



All hail Yamaha's king of clarity

There's an almighty war being waged in the mid-range AVR market, but Yamaha is in with a fighting chance thanks to its detail-loving RX-V675. [Adrian Justins](#) reports

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Lower mid-range
7.2-channel AVR

POSITION:
Middle of an
11-strong line-up

PEERS:
Denon AVR-X2000;
Pioneer VSX-923;
Onkyo TX-NR626

YAMAHA SEEMS TO have more receivers than the entire NFL with the RX-V675 sitting smack bang in the middle of an 11-strong lineup. Priced at £500, and claimed to deliver 125W per channel, its feature set is aimed at the home cinema enthusiast with a small-to-medium sized room rather than the mega-bucks custom install crowd. It does a lot that you would expect of a mid-range AVR and Yamaha has squeezed in some tempting higher-end features, notably multizone compatibility, 4K upscaling and MHL HDMI support for playing back HD movies from a tablet or smartphone.

Absent are built-in Wi-Fi and Bluetooth – something that Onkyo is hoping will tempt buyers towards its own receiver stable. Yamaha will sell you its YWA-10 Wi-Fi Adapter and YBA-11 Bluetooth Wireless Adapter, should you have the spare cash and want to fully streamline your network.

Apple fans are better served than owners of Windows and Android devices when it comes to wireless streaming, thanks to the

provision of AirPlay, but DLNA networking at least means it's possible to access music, including 24-bit FLAC tunes, from a server. The usually impressive vTuner provides extensive internet radio access and a built-in Napster client is a decent consolation for the absence of the music streaming industry-leader Spotify.

Pure of heart

Proprietary Yamaha innovations include Dialogue Lift, Dialogue Level Adjustment and calibration using YPAO Reflected Sound Control (RSC). Critically, the RX-V675 is a beneficiary of Yamaha's Total Purity Concept, which utilises discrete power amplifiers for each channel in order to minimise distortion. Dedicated power supplies for the analogue and digital circuitry help prevent digital noise from affecting analogue circuitry whilst anti-vibration heatsinks are designed to suppress vibration from transistors.

The Yamaha's seven channels cater for 7.1 (either with surround back or Front



Like many AVR remotes, Yamaha's handset can be fiddly to use

Presence speakers), 5.1 with bi-amping and second zone audio; a feature called Intelligent Amp Assign automatically feeds the correct speakers according to the selected mode.

AV connectivity includes a decent count of six HDMI inputs but just one HDMI output, which is disappointing given the generous provision of less-important composite and component video sockets. You'll need to step up to the £650 RX-V775 for an extra HDMI out. At least the solo effort here supports ARC and 3D.

Post-processing party

The US will give up the right to bear arms before Yamaha makes an AVR without DSP modes and the RX-V675 is bestowed with an arsenal of them – 17 in total, including venue-replicating audio flavours (Hall in

'The Yamaha conjures the kind of aural performance that will have you reaching for your favourite discs'

Vienna, anyone?). It also sports handy options for volume trimming and enhancing compressed music.

Design and build-quality are suitably middle of the road, with a reasonable degree of durability to the construction and speaker terminals. From across the room, Yamaha's RX-V675 cuts a stylish dash, particularly in its silver finish (black is also available). There's a decently clear LED display at its centre, but upon closer inspection the fascia layout seems a bit random. At least the volume knob is nicely engineered.

By and large, the onscreen menu system seems logically set out and aspects such as the speaker layout diagrams look good, but the font and many of the icons are laughably primitive compared with what you see on any current TV. It's a pity because if you are going to enter the RX-V675's DSP playground regularly you'd like to feel that what you see matches in some way what your ears will experience.

Strangely, there's also the odd unexplained menu symbol that I couldn't fathom how to access. The remote control is a cramped affair too; a far better experience can be found using the Yamaha AV control app, which is slicker than the deck on the *Exxon Valdez*, and makes it a lot easier and more enjoyable to access menu-based features.

Setup is made simpler by the aforementioned YPAO RSC calibration tool. Set your subwoofer to half volume, plug in the tiny microphone and let the amp work its magic. The system nailed my speaker

settings (which isn't always guaranteed), and manually tweaking positioning and output is simple enough.

As a music machine, the Yamaha ticks along nicely. Aside from the fact bitrates aren't revealed and you can't search for a station name, the vTuner system is well implemented, handily revealing bonus folders of recent podcasts for some stations – for example, I stumbled across a fascinating Mick Jagger interview on Absolute Radio.

AirPlay works well, with album artwork displayed alongside artist, album and track names. Operation without the TV on is perfectly possible, with the track name shown on the LED window. A front USB will also play from Apple devices and flash drives.

Spine-tingling sonics

As for multichannel material, the RX-V675 seems perfectly suited to a good set of small or medium speakers, such as my own Q Acoustics Q 7000s. Sound quality is vibrant, crisp and clear. The SACD recording of *War of the Worlds* has incredible clarity, with Richard Burton's commentary resonating with spine-tingling sonorousness. Despite a slight lack of warmth, Blu-rays are delightful, too, with the RX-V675 bringing out unexpected subtleties in *The Rise of the Guardians*, such as the engine and whistle of the toy ice train and the splintering ice as Jack Frost plays on the frozen lake. There may be some material for which the DSP modes improve matters but sticking with the direct mode generally pays dividends. Dialogue adjustment did add a bit of needed air to Walter's grumpy rants in *The Big Lebowski* on Dave HD, delivered via Sky.

The Yamaha conjures the kind of aural performance that will have you reaching for your favourite discs. For me, that means *Jaws*, and John Williams' classic two-note phrase that underpins the movie's soundtrack is delivered with menace. Again, the Yamaha's crispness helps paint the cinematic picture; from the eerie creaking of the boat's damaged timbers to the sound of the big fish's first victim swimming and scooping her hands in the water, every last drop of detail is convincingly conveyed.

Band of Brothers' Blu-ray DTS-HD MA soundtrack ups the aggression, but the RX-V675 relishes the change in pace. When the US infantry encounters a holed-up German outfit it leaps into life as mortar shells explode across the front soundstage, bullets fizz across the room and plaster remnants rain down, seemingly covering you in dust. Dialogue is nicely focussed on the centre channel and the LFE rumble is perfectly blended.

Overall, the RX-V675 misses out on a couple of features and is not the most enjoyable machine to operate, but there's no arguing with its sonic prowess. Adept with both movies and music, it won't disappoint ■

ON THE MENU



→ Yamaha's onscreen display doesn't look as smart and stylish as the AVR's exterior, with functional text options and basic graphics. The best control option is via the brand's iOS and Android control app

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY TRUEHD: Yes. And Dolby Pro-Logic IIx; Dolby Digital EX
DTS-HD MASTER AUDIO: Yes. Plus DTS Neo:6; DTS 96/24
THX: No
MULTICHANNEL INPUT: 7 x 125W
MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED): 7 x 125W
MULTIROOM: Yes. Second audio zone
AV INPUTS: 5 x composite; 4 x digital audio (2 x optical and 2 x coaxial)
HDMI: 6 x inputs; 1 x output
COMPONENT VIDEO: 2 x inputs; 1 x output
VIDEO UPSCALING: Yes. To 4K
DIMENSIONS: 435(w) x 171(h) x 364(d)mm
WEIGHT: 10kg
ALSO FEATURING: Binding-post speaker terminals plus Zone 2 spring clips; bi-amping; simultaneous Zone 1 and 2 operation; lip sync; Cinema DSP 3D; Virtual Presence Speaker; Compressed Music Enhancer; DSD; multiple DSPs; media playback including FLAC (192kHz/24-bit), PCM, WAV, WMA; Apple iOS and Android control apps; FM/AM tuner with RDS; AirPlay; vTuner internet radio; Napster; DLNA compatible; Ethernet; 12V trigger; DC inputs for Wi-Fi and Bluetooth adapters; USB input

HCC VERDICT



Yamaha RX-V675

→ £500 Approx → uk.yamaha.com
 → Tel: 0844 811 1116

HIGHS: Powerful, clean sound; efficient setup system; audio streaming quality; smartphone app control

LOWS: Primitive onscreen graphics; cramped remote control; Bluetooth and Wi-Fi are optional extras

Performance ★★★★★

Design ★★★★★

Features ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

HDMI switching revamped

DVDO's digital signal shifter is ready to handle 4K. **John Archer** is therefore a happy bunny



THE CLAIM TO fame of DVDO's new Quick6 HDMI Switcher is that it provides AV systems with 'the latest HDMI spec'. Which translates into support from the 6-in, 2-out HDMI switchbox for both Android MHL connections and 4K/Ultra HD signals. Also onboard is InstaPrevue, providing live onscreen previews of what's showing on each HDMI input. You also get ARC support, picture-in-picture playback and InstaPort S technology for faster switching.

The slim, robust Quick6 mostly performs admirably, immaculately handling every video format I threw at it – including native 4K from a Sony server. Switching speed is good, too, even between 4K feeds. There are limitations, though. First, InstaPrevue doesn't work with

4K; you just get a blank box for 4K sources if you hit InstaPrevue while watching an HD source, while the InstaPrevue button doesn't work at all if you're watching 4K.

More seriously, the Quick6 inevitably doesn't support the still-under-development HDMI 2.0 standard, and so can only handle 4K/UHD streams up to 30Hz. The box should still handle most future 4K film releases, but nothing's guaranteed until HDMI 2.0 has been ratified.

Smaller issues are that the Quick6's menu while watching 4K is eye-strainingly small, and that I suffered a strange initial bug where no sound carried through the HDMI and occasionally my Sky box claimed that my display 'didn't support HDCP', until I

DVDO's switcher offers 6-in, 2-out HDMI configuration

deactivated, then reactivated, the Quick6's CEC option.

Overall, though, the Quick6 is a useful, uniquely feature-rich switchbox for its money. Just remember that neither we nor DVDO can predict what 4K's HDMI future might hold.

HCC VERDICT

DVDO Quick6 HDMI Switcher → £400

Overall ★★★★★

PURE JONGO A2 → Approx £100

They use it in the Congo

Adrian Justins discovers that there's more to this cutesy gizmo than just a daft name

THERE ARE PLENTY of amps and AVRs in use that don't have AirPlay and/or Bluetooth. Such machines are ideal bedfellows for the Jongo A2, which boasts a built-in 24-bit DAC with a stereo phono output. It is, of course, possible that your own amp's DAC may give superior results, in which case you can opt to output raw digital files from its coaxial and optical outputs.

Many other audio streamers in the same price bracket are similarly equipped but most only have a Bluetooth connection; the Jongo A2 also works over Wi-Fi, in conjunction with the Pure Connect iOS and Android app. The app lets you stream tunes stored on your device and, for a monthly fee of £5 after a free 30-day trial period, gives access to the Pure Music service, a well-stocked cloud-based catalogue of music, podcasts and internet radio stations.

There's something almost toy-like about the Jongo A2's design but the plastic used looks hard-wearing, and it's available in a range of colours. All sockets are logically placed at the back. Getting going is simply a case of hooking the unit onto your Wi-Fi network using the app, then sitting back and letting your music waft across the room. Results via my Onkyo AVR and Q Acoustics speakers proved excellent, with the DAC delivering a clean sound without sibilance. The cymbals in Britten's *Canadian Carnival op19* were effortlessly defined against the strings and clarinet. Switching to Bluetooth results in a distinctly more cramped sound, with higher frequencies especially trailing off. The A2 doesn't support aptX, unfortunately.

Overall, Pure's adaptor does exactly what it sets out to do, with a bit of charm thrown in.



Colour options also include green, yellow and black

HCC VERDICT

Pure Jongo A2 → £100

Overall ★★★★★

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Put sound on a pedestal

Tempted to get a soundbar? SpeakerCraft's TV audio upgrade goes one step beyond by doubling as a plinth for your flatscreen. **Steve May** gets an earful



THE LATEST MANUFACTURER to sound off with a soundbar product is speciality hi-fi outfit SpeakerCraft, better known for its high-performance in-wall architectural loudspeakers. Only the brand's new £600 CS3 isn't exactly a sound bar, it's more an audio pedestal.

In many ways, the CS3 is even easier to accommodate than a standard 'bar. Your flatscreen is simply parked on top. Not all displays will fit, though. The square-ish CS3 is unlikely to suit some of the wackier TV stands now available, so check for before buying.

Tipping the scales at 11kg, the CS3 is a substantial enclosure, albeit one unlikely to win many beauty pageants. The finish is a dull matt black and the only design flourish is the SpeakerCraft badge on the magnetic grille. It can take a considerable amount of weight, though – a 55in screen will not present a problem. Audio inputs comprise coaxial and digital optical, plus a pair of stereo phonos. A Bluetooth receiver is also integrated, should you want to stream tunes direct from an enabled smartphone. The speaker also comes with a remote control.

The CS3 doesn't offer any kind of video display, just a power illumination LED partially obscured behind the speaker fabric. In use this can be problematic, as there's no way of gauging what volume level you're at.

All hooked up

Setup is simply a matter of running a digital optical from your TV to the box. Most screens allow you to deselect the internal speakers in preference for an external audio solution in the main menu settings. If your partnered TV does

not allow for that, then the volume on the screen itself needs to be zero'd. It's worth noting, though, that the enclosure doesn't have any Dolby Digital decoding onboard. While this won't present problems when using Freeview channels as a source, any DD bitstreams routed into the set and then passed through to the CS3, be they from a Sky+HD box or Blu-ray player, will result in nothing but deathly silence. All source components need to deliver PCM stereo to be heard.

The CS3 isn't short of muscle. Rated at 20W into all four channels, it can thump with a ferocity that'll terrify the average slim-line panel. Sonically, it's a full-range speaker with a rich, well-rounded delivery. It can plumb the depths down to around 32Hz, but it saves most of its energy for 100Hz. Mid-range delivery is tight and crisp, keeping dialogue intelligible. Overall bass output is considerable, so much so that you might even consider ramping it back; bass and treble trim and boost are available, along with an EQ Reset, on the remote control.

Although well defined, inevitably the stereo soundstage is somewhat narrow. There's a DSP Surround mode which spreads things out, but this isn't actually that much fun to listen to.

The CS3's Bluetooth audio performance offers functionality rather than fidelity. There's no apparent support for aptX, but your tunes will certainly enjoy the up-front presentation.

If you're looking for a serious audio upgrade for your TV, then SpeakerCraft's CS3 is well worth tracking down. While undeniably expensive for what's on offer, it offers a more traditional hi-fi sound than it's nearest rival, the Sonos PlayBar. It'll be interesting to see how this offering compares to the incoming Denon DHT-T100, which adopts a similar design approach. Overall, the CS3 sounds great with movies, general TV and as a single-enclosure audio speaker, and when it comes to Bluetooth streaming, few docks can hold a candle to it ■

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVE UNITS: 4 x 3in paper cone mid-range drivers; 2 x 1in silk dome tweeters; 2 x downward firing 5.25in subwoofers
AMPLIFICATION: 4 x 20W
CONNECTIONS: Analogue stereo; optical digital audio; coaxial digital audio
DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA: No/No
SEPARATE SUB: No
REMOTE CONTROL: Yes
DIMENSIONS: 102(h) x 711(w) x 419(d)mm
WEIGHT: 11kg
FEATURES: Surround DSP mode; Bluetooth streaming; magnetic grille; supplied with digital optical audio cable

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Soundbar/TV 'podium'

POSITION: SpeakerCraft's only soundbar speaker

PEERS: Bose Solo TV; Denon DHT-T100; Sonos PlayBar

HCC VERDICT

SpeakerCraft CS3

→ £600 Approx → www.aldoussystems.co.uk
 → Tel: 01296 719 582

HIGHS: Powerful, full-range presentation; sturdy pedestal design; Bluetooth streaming for Smart device hookup

LOWS: No Dolby Digital decoder; no status display; no aptX provision

Performance ★★★★★
Design ★★★★★
Features ★★★★★
Overall ★★★★★



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Soundbars ...with subwoofers!

You don't have to ignore low-frequency fun when buying a soundbar – plenty of products come bundled with a dedicated bass bin. **Adrian Justins** auditions a mid-range quartet of combis

WATCHING A BLU-RAY movie on a slinky flatscreen TV is a feast for the eyes but using the screen's own speakers can feel like drinking Moët & Chandon from a paper cup. You may be unlikely to use one for serious home cinema but a soundbar is a straightforward and effective way of adding sonic satisfaction to a TV, especially in a second room or when a full-on surround setup simply isn't feasible.

Plenty to choose from

Soundbars now range in price from below £100 to well over £1,000. Power output isn't the only variable – some feature better

connectivity, with basic models – including some on test here – limited to digital optical and analogue inputs. Extra features such as high-resolution audio decoding, Bluetooth

'A soundbar is a straightforward and effective way of adding sonic satisfaction to a TV'

audio streaming and, more usefully, HDMI inputs and outputs – allowing owners to simply route the sound from all sources via the TV's Audio Return Channel – also appear, although it's not necessarily true that the more you spend, the more bonus features you get.

These solo-enclosure convenience products typically contain several speaker drivers handling different frequencies, but here we're looking at those that are partnered with a separate subwoofer dedicated to delivering low-end thrills – because your Blu-ray collection will thank you for it...

Approx £400 → www.orbitsound.com

Orbitsound M12

Chunky, but packing quite a punch

The M12 replaces the iPod dock of its predecessor with Bluetooth connectivity



ORBITSOUND HAS MADE a name for itself with its Spatial Sound Technology that uses side-firing drivers and proprietary encoding to create a satisfying, room-filling sound, eliminating the sweet spot. Made from wood rather than plastic, the M12 is a compact 60cm-wide unit that easily fits on a narrow shelf if its 9cm height precludes table-top placement.

It boasts a wireless sub and 300W power output but looks uncompetitive on the features front, with no HDMI input, no Dolby or DTS decoding (it takes PCM only) and no display window. Bluetooth connectivity

provides some redemption, complementing the optical, stereo phono inputs and 3.5mm jack. On top of the box are basic controls, replicated along with treble/bass adjustment on the remote. There's no display, though.

The M12 needs a good few days running in before it loses its high-end shrillness but overall it delivers a powerful, lively sound. Dialogue is a real strength, while mid-range and low-end effects, such as the explosions and flying shrapnel of *Super 8*, also have terrific impact. The main issue is that the sub doesn't feel naturally in sympathy with the main 'bar, and has to be adjusted. Rear controls allow you to increase or decrease the level by 8dB but additional bass management may be needed using the remote when changing sources.

MP3s streamed via Bluetooth offer impressive sonic imaging, but the keyboards on OMD's *Enola Gay* proved a little sibilant. Despite that, this pricey system impresses.

HCC VERDICT

Orbitsound M12 → £400

Overall ★★★★★

Otone Sonora AV-Lance

A good-looking affordable debut

WHILE STYLISH, OTONE'S first ever soundbar is not exactly on-trend in terms of its size. The 101cm width is suited to larger (46in+) screens and its 10cm height could obscure some of today's sets that provide very little gap between tabletop and screen. And despite its size, rated power output is average, as the AV-Lance musters just 120W overall. The 'bar' has four 2.75in midrange drivers and dual tweeters; a 6.25in driver lurks in the rear-ported wireless subwoofer.

Build quality is inconsistent, the highlight being the D-shaped ends with small green plastic strip. Yet the flexible plastic front grille can be easily prised off, revealing a row of unprotected tiny LEDs that are hidden by the grille's stocking cover. The bar's feet, however, are made of thick, durable steel and can be detached and rotated for wall mounting. Connections are limited to a digital optical input, analogue stereo phonos and a 3.5mm jack.

There are seven control buttons along the top of the main unit, complemented by possibly the lightest remote control ever made, weighing just 23g. Otone keeps its 'bar simple in terms of features, with SRS TruSurround and SRS WOW HD offering the only excitement – there's no Bluetooth here.. Some kind of display is better than none but operation is not aided by the ambiguity of the crude indicator light system, which sometimes fails to make it obvious what mode is engaged.

In terms of performance, the AV-Lance does a reasonable job, but lacks vitality and suffers from a muddy-sounding mid-range. The TruSurround feature tends to dilute its sonic impact; WOW HD delivers more punch, but extended listening becomes tiring. Not the most exciting performer, then, but the stylistic flourishes and affordable price are welcome.



Installation is aided by the wireless subwoofer, but the 'bar stands quite high on its feet

HCC VERDICT

Otone Sonora AV-Lance → £250

Overall ★★★★★

Approx £300 → www.panasonic.co.uk

Panasonic SC-HTB527

This silver-styled combi offers plenty of features

THE SC-HTB527 PROVIDES nearly everything you could want from a mid-range soundbar, including six drivers, a (120W) wireless subwoofer, HDMI inputs with ARC and 3D passthrough, plus Dolby Digital and DTS decoding – all wrapped up in a smart-looking package. On the missing list, though, are USB and Bluetooth support.

The 120W soundbar looks slim but fitting it between a screen and a tabletop may be touch and go thanks to its 7.5cm height. It relies on an LED light show to tell you what's happening regarding source selection and incoming signal identification (DD/DTS/PCM). The remote control keeps things ultra simple with volume, subwoofer volume, mute, source and power buttons. Additional features are available including Dolby Virtual Speaker,

a 3D surround effect, a Clear Dialogue mode and the ability to switch to secondary audio streams when receiving bitstreams from Blu-ray decks. Accessing these features is

Panasonic's soundbar features HDMI connectivity



something of a performance, requiring the simultaneous pressing of a combination of buttons on the remote and the soundbar. What larks.

The subwoofer's MDF finish is a tad unrefined in places, in keeping with the Panasonic's 3D sound mode. When Charles yells 'Production value!' in *Super 8* the thud of the floorboards is somewhat indelicate with 3D on, yet the clarity of the horns in a slice of classical music fares better. Unfortunately, whichever mode you try, the higher registers are the first to tail off as volume increases, and neither is the subwoofer's performance ideal. When Jacko sings *Starting Something in This Is It* on BD the vocals are excellently articulated, but the thud of the bass needs reining in and the gain is highly sensitive, requiring a delicate touch on the remote to get it right.

Well-specified (albeit without Bluetooth), but the performance here could be improved.

HCC VERDICT

Panasonic SC-HTB527 → £300

Overall ★★★★★

Samsung HW-F551

A slender soundbar helped by a potent woofer

THE HW-F551 IS an impressive-looking piece of kit that claims 310W power from its substantial (wirelessly connected) subwoofer and long, thin, main unit. The soundbar is fronted with a high-quality mesh grille, behind which is a clear, scrolling OLED display. On top are basic controls.

Measuring just 5.5cm high, the soundbar can easily be accommodated on a tabletop stand but its recessed sockets are also designed to aid wall mounting. Connectivity is decent with HDMI input and output, optical, 3.5mm analogue, Bluetooth and USB (although inserting a drive into the latter could be awkward if the 'bar is on a wall). Operation is easy enough once you've familiarised yourself with the plethora of buttons on the half-sized remote.

There are options for 3D sound, dynamic range control, subwoofer volume and six DSP modes to choose from. The subwoofer is the star of the show, with meaty resonant lower

register sounds and consistently fast and accurate LFE. The trouble is that it needs tweaking to avoid swamping the main bar, which can

struggle with dialogue. With *Super 8*'s pre-crash scene the kids' voices are weak and ineffective. Engaging the Cinema DSP mode curiously introduces an echoey effect, nor does the 3D mode help. The best results come from keeping the EQ flat and adjusting the sub; and overall the mayhem of the crash scene isn't bad with metal objects clanging distinctly. There is, however, a harshness to higher frequencies and overall the sound isn't as expansive as I'd hoped for considering the Samsung's price tag.

Samsung's HW-F551 offers both Bluetooth and USB hookup



HCC VERDICT

Samsung HW-F551 → £350

Overall ★★★★★

Final standings

OF THIS QUARTET of soundbars there's one clear winner – as long as you don't want HDMI...

IT MAY SEEM unfair putting the £250 Otone Sonora AV-Lance up against rivals costing up to £150 more but this test does nothing to disprove the adage that you get what you pay for, certainly in terms of performance, if not features. Its performance is rather run of the mill, and operating the unit can be tiresome. It's also the least well-connected of the foursome tested. The Panasonic SC-HTB527 offers a bit more in terms of features, including HDMI connectivity, and may be easier to slip into a setup. However, some of its finer controls demand physical contact with the 'bar itself and its performance is a mixed bag, requiring regular tinkering to suit sources. I'd argue it doesn't justify the £50 premium over the Otone.

Runner up here is the Samsung HW-F551, which totally looks the part, thanks to its voluminous subwoofer and thin, elegant main unit. It ticks all connectivity boxes and is the only model auditioned with a proper display window, making operation much less hassle. But its performance is marred by weaker-than-expected dialogue and unrefined treble detailing. The Orbitound M12 therefore sneaks top spot – because despite its lack of HDMI, portly form factor and high price tag, it's by far the best-sounding proposition here ■





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In my day...

DIGITAL COPY

The annual EISA convention has got **Mark Craven** thinking about the changing nature of home cinema – and wondering what his tech-life will be like in the future

AS THE IFA Berlin show approaches, once again we bring you the annual European Imaging and Sound Association (EISA) awards. These AV accolades, which will be officially handed out during the German tech expo, are decided by an industry body made up of 50 specialist magazines (including *Home Cinema Choice*), drawn from 19 European countries and covering six categories – audio, home theatre, video, mobile devices, in-car electronics and photography. The judging process, conducted over the Summer, is always interesting – as usual there are some awards where agreement is almost immediate; other categories spark fraught discussion (arguments, basically).

The EISA awards have changed dramatically since they began in 1982. Then, the organisation issued a sole trophy for 'Camera of the Year'; in 2013 the number of awards has surpassed 40.

Yet things have also changed in the last 12 months. The world of home electronics is – as our Star Letter-writer points out in this issue – moving at a heck of a pace, so everyone else has to step into line fast; the EISA Video panel this year introduced a category for Ultra HD TVs and retired the 3D TV category, reflecting the growing concerns of flatscreen buyers in 2013. And the Audio panel now judges wireless headphones, USB DACs and digital audio players – product sectors that are booming now, but would have caused head-scratching in the past.

Keep on dreaming

Personally, I find the pace of change utterly fantastic. The constant stream of invention pouring out of the industry's R&D labs is something that should be savoured. When I started on *HCC* in 2005 we didn't have discrete 7.1 audio, super-fast

broadband was (literally) a pipe dream and flatscreen TVs were expensive and chunky, with most limited to HD Ready resolution.

In fact, **if you'd transported me from 2005 to the present day and sat me down in my own viewing room I would probably have been blown away**

(and not just by the number of new Arnold Schwarzenegger action movies on the disc shelf). Smartphone control apps? Thinscreen plasmas? YouTube on my telly?

I do, however, appreciate that the pace of change can be frustrating for many, especially as it involves a few dead ends and false hopes. Home cinema fans have become so used to being informed that something is going to be the 'next big thing', only for it turning out to be the 'next big disappointment', that we've become hardened sceptics. I'm sure it's not the same in, say, the car enthusiast world. When Ford launches a new motor, do petrolheads narrow their eyes and immediately begin calculating when it will be obsolete? I doubt it.

The alternative, though, is for consumer electronics companies to stop innovating. And who would like that? Just because 3D hasn't hit the ground running doesn't mean I want the tech boffins to stop work on autostereoscopy. Nor should they pause now that 4K is a reality. Keep on going, to 8K and beyond!

I can take the failures – SED TV, OnDigital, HD DVD – because I know in the bigger scheme of things that home cinema always gets better, easier and more affordable. And I don't want to be sitting in my viewing room in 2021 thinking that nothing has changed in the last eight years ■

*Does technology move too fast for you to keep up?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

Mark Craven is hoping that his viewing room in 2021 will include levitating chairs, a roll-up OLED TV and a BD deck that doesn't take ages to wake up





FILM FANATIC

Masters of Cinema's recent Blu-ray release of a 1915 silent classic has given *HCC*'s software guru **Anton van Beek** yet another thing to worry about...

YOU MIGHT THINK that reviewing a Blu-ray would be a pretty simple affair. You just power up your home cinema, pop the platter in the player and sit back and relax for a couple of hours. Then, when the final credits have rolled, you spin back through the disc to check out any technical issues – or highlights – that you've made a note of during the film. Once that's done, you head over to the Special Features menu and start working your way through all of the additional gubbins that has been squeezed onto the disc. Then you can finally attribute star ratings to the elements that you are scoring and come up with an overall verdict. Like I said: simple.

But every now and again a disc comes along that leaves me thinking about how I should approach the idea of star ratings – and this time around it's Eureka Video's Masters of Cinema Blu-ray release of *The Birth of a Nation*.

Now, this isn't the first time I've come face-to-screen with D.W. Griffith's legendary 1915 silent epic chronicling the relationship between two families through the American Civil War and the subsequent Reconstruction. Oh no: I still have very vivid memories of sitting down in a lecture hall at university to watch what was described as one of the key films in the development of cinema. We were also warned about the film's content, of course. But even so, **nothing could have prepared me for its vulgar and inflammatory depiction of African-Americans** – nor its portrayal of the silly-costumed Ku Klux Klan as a bunch of do-gooders.

While some might argue that *The Birth of a Nation* is simply a product of its time, the truth is that even during its original release Griffith's film was dogged by protests and banned in various US

cities. In other words, it was recognized as presenting a deliberately distorted and racist view of American history even then. Yet none of this stopped it from being a huge commercial success (with box office takings reaching \$50m by 1949), or reshaping the language of cinema into a form whose influence can still be seen today.

Getting down to business

But how should I go about reviewing the Blu-ray? Well, having sat through all 193 minutes of Eureka's restoration, I can confirm that the distributor has worked its usual magic. While still plagued with dirt, scratches and other blemishes, the imagery looks far richer and more robust than I ever expected. Coupled with extremely enjoyable DTS-HD MA 5.1 and 2.0 scores, this ensures that the disc scores well from a technical standpoint.

Eureka also earns marks when it comes to extra features – in a large part due to the inclusion of seven additional Civil War-themed shorts made by D.W. Griffith during 1910 and 1911 (although, again, there is plenty of uncomfortable race-related material at the forefront of these as well).

But then I get come to the film itself. How do you reconcile *The Birth of a Nation*'s historical significance and cinematic lavishness – more evident than ever in Eureka's beautifully tinted restoration – with its blatant racism and deliberate attempts to pervert history towards its own crackpot agenda? And how does any conclusion you draw from all of this translate into a five-star rating? You'll just have to check out my review on p104 to see if I managed to find a satisfactory answer ■

Do you think that giving films star ratings is a good or bad idea? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Anton van Beek spent fifteen minutes trying to work out how much \$50m in 1949 would be worth in 2013, before giving up completely



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Certified: AV-Holic!



AV-Holic **Alex Xidakis** explains how he turned his new loft into a cinema room without breaking the bank

Introduce yourself...

I'm Alex Xidakis, 34 and a Manufacturing Engineer.

How long have you been an AV-Holic?

I think the signs were there from the age of 10 or 12, when I would move my Dad's stereo system to the TV before watching movies, so I could experience them with *stereo* sound! I put my first hi-fi/HT system together in 1998.

When did you decide to convert your loft into a cinema room?

We bought our house just over five years ago and among the things I was looking for was a loft that could be converted into a home cinema. I've always thought it's the ideal place for a cinema room because you can control the sources of external light and – because it's out of the way – you can minimise the amount of sound escaping to the rest of the house.

Did you do it all yourself or did you bring in the professionals?

I obtained quotes a couple of years ago for

both the build and the drawing up of plans but they were extortionate. I'm an engineer by profession so felt I was more than capable of doing the required research and calculations as far as Building Regulations are concerned, so ended up doing all the plans myself. I'm also a keen DIY-er and had decided on doing the build myself too but, due to an accident just before we'd planned to start, I brought in a builder to do the conversion. I did the decorating myself, though.

How long did the build take?

The builder was working on a part-time basis so the work took about three months.

Is there anything you'd do differently if you did it again?

I would have taken the very heavy, old Edwardian chair and sofa into the room before the stud wall was built around the stairwell – the sofa needed modification, two friends and some precision manoeuvring but we got it up there! Other than that, I think the end result is perfection – even if I do say so myself.

Alex designed the room layout and handled the decoration himself



The room houses a growing Blu-ray collection – all bought way below RRP



Our AV-Holic always wanted a loft to convert...

What kit's in the setup?

A Panasonic PT-AE5000 projector sits outside the cinema room, beaming pictures onto a custom-built screen via a small opening on the rear wall. A Panasonic DMP-BDT500 Blu-ray player spins the discs and handles HD audio decoding, feeding via its six-channel outs to a Primare SPA21 AV amplifier. The 5.1 speaker setup consists of Tannoy Revolution R3s, R2s and RC speakers and a REL Strata 5 sub.

Roughly how much have you spent on it?

I can tell you exactly how much because I've kept a record of every piece of kit I've bought since 1998, noting the amount paid compared to its RRP. I know that for my current HT setup I've spent £5,031, which through negotiation on new kit and by buying discontinued items, is just 63 per cent of RRP. As for Blu-ray discs, my first one was purchased this year following completion of the cinema room but the collection is quickly growing and I'm paying £4.50 on average for discs, thanks to a well-known online auction site and an expanding second-hand high-street market.



...and was soon getting his hands dirty in his new house

What's next on your equipment wish list?

I'm watching out for all sorts at the moment including M&K Sound speakers, Bryston and Primare power amps and a second REL sub. What is a definite, though, is that I'll be building an HTPC soon because I want to start shows off with the Pearl & Dean titles followed by some trailers. That Pearl and Dean music really gives you the genuine cinema feeling!

What's your favourite bit of kit?

Easy – the Primare. Prior to the cinema room, my stereo and HT systems were combined, with the Primare the ideal component to sit in the middle due to its brilliance with music. Despite its inability to process HD audio formats (now not a problem thanks to the Panasonic deck), it forms the heart of the HT setup, sounding and looking fantastic.

What do your friends think of the room?

I've had nothing but positive comments, which is pleasing because it took a long time to draw up the plans for the loft conversion and almost as long to settle on the décor! When they see



The Panasonic PJ is housed outside the room

the room for the first time, family and friends are a bit speechless before being full of praise. A few have said I should charge an entry fee but they seem to say that after the show has already finished!

What's your favourite Blu-ray?

Can I only choose one? In that case it's ...*The Empire Strikes Back*. Fingers crossed that Disney gets things back on track!

What do you use to show off the system?

Something like *The Dark Knight Rises* with its impeccable picture and sound. *Wall-E* has just dropped through the letter box, though, so I might use that one now, too... ■

BE IN HCC!

EMAIL US: If you want to share your home cinema setup with other readers, email a selection of hi-res pictures (including one of yourself) to letters@homecinemachoice.com with the subject heading 'AV-Holic' – and please include a contact telephone number.

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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current technology? Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **HCC** is here to help

PJ systems are affordable!

Hi guys, great magazine. I write after I read the article about a big TV being cheaper than a projector setup.

I think it is the other way around. I paid £1,500 for an InFocus IN80 and a 7ft motorised screen about three and a half years ago. I love the picture from this projector and think it's fantastic. As far as power consumption goes, it uses less than my Pioneer Kuro. And as far as lamp replacement is concerned, my lamp is rated at 12,000 hours – and so far the PJ says I've used 350. This, by my reckoning, means that I should get at least 12 years use from my lamp. After that it will probably be time to change the projector.

There are a couple of down sides. First of all I only have normal curtains rather than black-out blinds, and the room gets very hot in the Summer, as it is like putting a heater on. So I don't use it much during very hot months. I should properly be enjoying the sunshine anyway!

But I definitely think it is cheaper to have a projector than buy a largescreen TV. And I would never buy an LED model as I think their pictures are just not as good as those of a plasma.

David Fox, via email

Richard Stevenson replies: I'm beginning to wish I'd never written that column! Yes, of course a projection system can in many cases be more

affordable than a largescreen TV – as proven by your example. However, the gist of my point remains. When home cinema began, there were no TVs large enough to compete with projectors. Now, you can get an 80in screen for a reasonable amount of money (and this is a size that a lot of people project at) – and for some (possibly not the die-hard AV fanatics that read HCC!) this will be a preferable solution.

I still like to get physical

It was interesting to read that physical discs still account for such a large percentage of film rental revenue. I wonder if that figure will drop significantly with the demise of Blockbuster. I found

it very useful and will definitely miss its great-value four Blu-rays for four nights for £10–£12 deal.

Now that there are no Blockbusters or any kind of video library, certainly anywhere near myself in Leeds, I find myself stuck with Sky Shop or iTunes for recently released titles and while I can just about justify £3.49 for a rental I can't bring myself to press the play button for rentals in HD. £4.49 is too high. I didn't have to pay extra for BD rentals at Blockbuster! This situation has just meant that I've stopped renting new movies.

While on the subject of Blu-ray, again it's encouraging to see disc sales on the increase. I certainly prefer to own the physical disc but it's annoying that despite

★ STAR LETTER...

We need to slow the pace of AV change!

So now the latest thing seems to be 4K. Whilst I have no objection to the continuing fast pace of the home cinema world, I am somewhat bemused by the quick succession of formats.

It doesn't seem that long ago that DVD was the best thing since sliced bread, but then along came Blu-ray. This was to introduce the AV world to HD. And what a great success story that has been. But no sooner had everyone gone out and replaced their old CRT sets with a shiny new flatscreen, than some boffin (namely James Cameron) decided that 3D was the future. So off we all trot to upgrade our TVs and projectors to 3D.

The myriad of auction websites must've done some good business out of all those HD flatscreens that nobody wanted any more. And it would seem that they are going to see a rise in business again as we are being encouraged to upgrade to 4K.

But hang on... should I not wait until 8K takes off? That sounds like a good idea, but then when 8K takes off, what's around the

corner next? I don't know about you, but I cannot afford to keep upgrading my TV and PJ at the pace at which the technology is changing. Besides, by the time I can afford an 8K TV they'll be saying 'ditch those old-fashioned screens, we're going holographic.'

So, do I just wait and see what's around the corner, or do I take the plunge and invest in a new TV, which by the time I've plugged it in and fired it up will be 'old-hat'? The missus is arguing that if it ain't broke, it doesn't need replacing. So my old HD Ready TV is still hung on the wall slogging its guts out trying to keep up. Where are the boffins when I need to explain the benefits to my dear beloved?

I love the fact that the R&D is on-going and that the wizards in the AV world are always exploring new ideas but could they please just slow it down

and give us all a chance to at least catch up?
Steve Old, via email

Mark Craven replies: Some would argue you've been incredibly sensible sticking with your HD Ready TV, although others will say you've been missing out on Full HD and 3D to boot...

The AV industry won't give you a chance to catch up – it needs to keep moving forward to keep making money! However, we wouldn't be too worried about 8K displays ousting 4K just yet. The former is a long way off. Our suggestion would be to see how quickly the price of 4K TVs erodes in the next year and then maybe upgrade your set.

Star letter-writer Steve wins a copy of **Olympus Has Fallen** on Blu-ray, courtesy of Lionsgate Home Entertainment. It's available to buy on BD, DVD and Download from August 26.



declining DVD sales companies still release a lot of TV series on DVD only. I'd love to own *The Good Wife* on Blu-ray and a number of other shows. Frustrating, too, that some great British dramas often from the BBC are released in the US on Blu-ray but not here! The wonderful adaptation of *Edwin Drood* for one.

And the US is already advertising the complete Season 7 of *Doctor Who* but there's no mention of it in the UK!
Ian C, Leeds

Anton van Beek replies: Thanks for the letter Ian. Firstly, the complete *Doctor Who: Series 7* will be released on UK Blu-ray on October 28 – a month after its US debut. Secondly, there are still Blockbuster stores in the Leeds area according to the company's website, and have you considered a direct-to-your-door disc rental system, such as that offered by LoveFilm or, indeed, Blockbuster? With the

latter, £5.99 gets you three discs a month, £9.99 gets you unlimited movies a month (but only two discs at a time) and £14.99 a month ups the unlimited offer to three discs at a time.

3D is dying out

Mark Craven's article on 3D was interesting and challenging. It stated that the BBC has put 3D 'on hold': I had read that it was abandoning it, with the last broadcast to be put out in November. Meanwhile, press articles report a drop in interest, while at cinemas, very many people choose the 2D versions.

This raises the question – just what exactly is the point of 3D? For sure, on a really good TV panel, it can be impressive. Yet the glasses dim the image, are a pain to wear, and for people who wear ordinary spectacles, a real problem. If 3D without glasses comes in, what then? Well for a start, 3D is never quite real. This is because a) we see with

peripheral vision, not images cut off by a frame and b) it exaggerates 3D in a way we do not actually see it in life. Take off the glasses and look at a 3D screen image: the two differing viewpoints are much further apart than when we look at each image with one eye in real life.

Then there is the question as to where it stands in entertainment. Take any TV drama – say, something such as the famous BBC *Pride and Prejudice*. Far from adding anything, it would be a real distraction – one does not want to be looking at 3D effects!

3D has failed before in previous cinema attempts. Will it therefore remain a kind of fringe extra? There is little TV material around, not likely to be much more. The BBC has abandoned it. TV manufacturers continue to make new 2D models. Now 4K is on the scene. Wonderful on a huge screen, but most home TVs are already great in HD. One is left wondering: the quest for

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perfection will always go on, but is 3D not part of it?

Roger Payne, via email

Mark Craven replies: The BBC's official line is that 3D production is 'on hold'. If you read that it has been completely abandoned, you were misinformed. Of course, that's not to say it won't be on hold forever...

You're right that 3D ticket sales at cinemas are dwindling – the Summer hit *Despicable Me 2* only saw around 27 per cent of its punters donning goggles. Multiplexes will be hoping that *Avatar 2* can reverse that trend ■

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Banshee: Season One is available to buy on DVD and Blu-ray from 2

September and HBO Home Entertainment has given us three copies of the BD to dish out.

Question:

In mythology what does a banshee do when somebody nearby is about to die?

Answer:

- A)** It wails **B)** It does a handstand
C) It washes their clothes

Email your answer with '**Banshee**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



Evil Dead

This bone-chilling and critically-acclaimed remake of Sam Raimi's 1981 horror classic is now available to buy on DVD and Blu-ray. And thanks to our good friends at

StudioCanal we've got our hands on five copies of the **Evil Dead** Blu-ray to pop in the post to lucky readers.

Question:

Who starred as Ash in Sam Raimi's original *Evil Dead* trilogy?

Answer:

- A)** Bruce Lee **B)** Bruce Campbell
C) Bruce Dickinson

Email your answer with '**Evil**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!



Fast & Furious 6

Prepare for more epic engine action and high-stakes adventure, as **Fast & Furious 6** is released on Blu-ray™ and DVD, both with UltraViolet™, from 16

September, 2013. To celebrate, we have five copies of the Blu-ray to give away.

Question:

Which wrestler plays the role of CIA agent Luke Hobbs in the *Fast & Furious* franchise?

Answer:

- A)** Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson
B) Shirley 'Big Daddy' Crabtree
C) Mark 'The Undertaker' Calaway

Email your answer with '**Fast**' as the subject heading – and include your postal address!

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→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **EVIL DEAD** Unleash some hi-def horror on your system
G.I. JOE: RETALIATION The toy-tastic sequel wages war against poor AV quality **OLYMPUS HAS FALLEN**
 Gerard Butler does *Die Hard* in the White House **JACK THE GIANT SLAYER** Blockbuster fantasy delivers
 giant-sized 3D thrills **ENTER THE DRAGON** Bruce Lee classic reborn on Blu-ray **AND MUCH MORE!**



Girls gone wild

Spring Breakers → Universal Pictures → All-region BD/R0 DVD

Cult director Harmony Korine's psychedelic satirical thriller *Spring Breakers* hits Blu-ray – head over to p103 to see whether this is one hi-def party that should not be missed

HCC RATINGS KEY...	
Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

Mia immediately regretted opening a can of Cherry Coke on the roller coaster



Dead and loving it all over again

Stylish remake of Sam Raimi's classic gorefest has plenty of AV chops to recommend it

→ EVIL DEAD

Neither a true remake or sequel, this reboot of the *Evil Dead* franchise sees five friends descend on *that* cabin in the middle of nowhere to help one of their number, Mia (Jane Levy), kick her drug addiction. However, when they find a mysterious book hidden away in the basement – a book that holds the secret to summoning up an ancient evil – cold turkey is the least of their worries.

Made with the blessing of original players Sam Raimi, Rob Tapert and Bruce Campbell, Fede Alvarez's *Evil Dead* is a blood-spurting, gore-strewn pandemonium of bigscreen horrors. While it could arguably do with a little more character development up front (something that Alvarez's commentary seems to indicate will happen whenever the 'Extended Cut' sees the light of day) this new *Evil Dead* definitely doesn't skimp on the gruesome stuff. In fact, the film's sheer overload of the grim and gory occasionally veers close to 'torture porn' territory – but thankfully it lacks the mean-spirited, malicious nature common to that sub-genre. A cracking horror film, then, but we do wish it had just a little splash of the black humour that made Raimi's original version so entertaining.

Picture: This extremely stylish new *Evil Dead* brushes up very well indeed on Blu-ray.

Presented in its original 2.40:1 aspect ratio, the clarity and fine detailing inherent in the disc's digital-to-digital AVC 1080p encode ensures that every gaping wound is horribly lifelike in its depiction.



HCC VERDICT

Evil Dead

→ StudioCanal

→ Region B BD → £23 Approx

WE SAY: First-rate picture and sound help make this relentless and gruesome horror flick a winner on BD

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★☆☆☆

Overall ★★★★★

Combined with excellent black levels and crisp edges, you get a macabre image with an authentic sense of depth and volume.

Colours are understandably rather muted for most of the film's running time. However, those all-important reds still pop pretty well thanks to strong saturation – particularly during key sequences such as Chapter 11's blood rain.

Audio: Alvarez's splatter flick comes armed with a finely-crafted DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack. While the mix seems a little quiet at times as the film builds up to its scares, it provides ferocious audio when the mayhem is finally unleashed.

Use of the surround speakers is particularly impressive; the sound designers have created a surprisingly expansive soundfield for a movie ostensibly set in such a claustrophobic location. And the clarity and precision of the mix, especially the delicate high-frequency effects, really comes into its own, adding uncomfortable sonic accompaniment to all of the onscreen gouging and flesh-ripping.

Extras: The extras here are rather perfunctory, so keep an eye out for that Extended Edition. Director Fede Alvarez and writer Rodo Sayagues are joined by actors Jane Levy, Lou Taylor Pucci and Jessica Lucas for an informative chat-track that covers most of the film's production, and the BD also summons up five featurettes – *Directing the Dead*, *Making Life Difficult*, *Being Mia*, *Evil Dead the Reboot* and *Unleashing the Evil Force*. All quite short but nonetheless interesting, with plenty of input from both Alvarez and Levy.

Trance

Pathé/20th Century Fox → Region B BD
£23 Approx



This entertainingly twisty psychological thriller sees Danny Boyle return to the sort of small-scale territory

he mined so effectively with his 1994 debut *Shallow Grave*. Shot digitally on a variety of cameras, the AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode looks sensational. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix also impresses with its immersive qualities – although it's a shame that we don't get the 7.1 mix that appeared on Fox's US Blu-ray. Extras include seven deleted scenes, a four-part *Making of...* and a retrospective of Boyle's films for Fox Searchlight – which therefore ignores *Shallow Grave* and *Trainspotting*.



The Look of Love

StudioCanal → Region B BD
£23 Approx



Michael Winterbottom and Steve Coogan's engaging biopic of adult entertainment baron Paul Raymond came

in for a fair amount of stick at the time of its cinema release. This BD version will hopefully allow for a more measured re-evaluation as – while far from perfect – it's not the overtly glamorous portrait of the controversial man some made it out to be. The film's garish evocation of '70s Soho is extremely well served by the disc's AVC 2.40:1 1080p picture and the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix helps bring the sleazy club settings to life. Extras include 11 interviews and eight deleted scenes.



The Host

Entertainment in Video → Region B BD
£25 Approx



Having already ruined vampires with her interminable *Twilight* saga, *The Host* finds author Stephenie Meyer

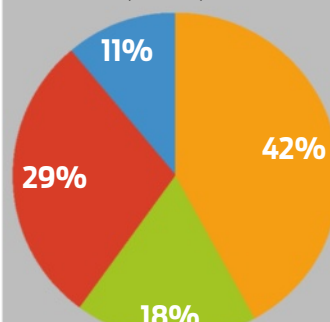
doing the same thing for aliens. While the story is all about a small human resistance fighting against outer-space invaders, the real focus of the film is yet another of Meyer's tedious love triangles (even if the girl in this particular equation is actually two beings sharing the same body). At least on Blu-ray the fine AVC 2.40:1 1080p imagery and DTS-HD MA 5.1 sonics help distract you from the dismal plot. Extras include a chat track, four deleted scenes and *Making of...* featurette.



WE ASKED...

Which is the best of the *Evil Dead* films?

- *The Evil Dead*
- *Evil Dead II*
- *Army of Darkness*
- *Evil Dead* (remake)



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action



Burning down the White House

Can Gerard Butler save the President from terrorists in this over-the-top action flick?

→ OLYMPUS HAS FALLEN

When the White House is overrun by North Korean terrorists and the President (Aaron Eckhart) is held hostage there's only one man who can save the day. No, not John McClane – the man of action this time is Mike Banning (Gerard Butler), the Secret Service agent the President still blames for the death of the First Lady (Ashley Judd) 18 months earlier.

The John McClane reference isn't without its merits though as, for all intents and purposes, this is *Die Hard* in the White House. The advantage here is that *Olympus Has Fallen* is a heck of a lot more fun than the past couple of *Die Hard* sequels.

Picture: *Olympus Has Fallen* arrives on Blu-ray with a perfectly acceptable but not exactly mind-blowing AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode.

The biggest issue can be found in the film's darker sequences – and as these make up the majority of its second and third acts they are fairly common. Black levels in these sequences vary between instances of crush and washed-out greys, with the unfortunate side effect of flattening out the film's colour palette. Some unsightly noise also raises its head on a couple of occasions.

However, despite these concerns, the encode is far from being a failure. The film's daylight scenes (such as Chapter 3's aerial assault on the White House) look every bit as crisp, sharp and colourful as you'd expect from a modern blockbuster. They're certainly good enough to highlight the deficiencies in some of the film's shoddier VFX sequences.

Audio: The DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtrack is a hi-octane blast from start to finish, but a prime example of its



heavyweight delivery is the helicopter attack in Chapter 9, which showcases its immersive audio placement and exceptionally potent LFE presence – rotor blades chug and weapon fire zips from speaker to speaker. The orchestral score from Trevor Morris may be a little generic and sombre, but otherwise this is a dynamic, energetic mix.

Extras: Lionsgate's Blu-ray release is accompanied by a collection of five behind-the-scenes featurettes (*The Epic Ensemble*, *Under Surveillance: The Making of Olympus Has Fallen*, *Deconstructing the Black Hawk Sequence*, *Ground Combat: Fighting the Terrorists* and *Creating the Action: VFX and Design*). Ranging in length from three to seven minutes, none goes into particularly great depth (and we'd love to have been privy to discussions about the movie's imminent rival production, *White House Down*), but they still give a reasonable glimpse into the production. A gag reel is also included.



HCC VERDICT

Olympus Has Fallen

→ Lionsgate → Region B BD

→ £23 Approx

WE SAY: Not the best Blu-ray package you'll ever see, but still a fun way to scratch that action movie itch

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

'How does Bruce get his head so shiny that I can see my own reflection in it?'



Gunning for reference quality

Paramount's spectacular Blu-ray release shows there's still some life left in this old soldier...



→ G.I. JOE: RETALIATION

Now here's a curious thing: a film that is both a sequel to a recent action blockbuster as well as being a reboot of the entire franchise.

Of the Joes featured in 2009's *G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra*, only Duke (Channing Tatum) and Snake Eyes (Ray Park) return for this second outing. And Tatum's character only gets about 10 minutes of screen time before being killed alongside almost the entire GI Joe force in a sneak attack masterminded by the US President (Jonathan Pryce) – who is actually Zartan, the Cobra master of disguise.

Now the handful of survivors— Roadblock (Dwayne Johnson), Lady Jaye (Adrianne Palicki), Flint (D.J. Cotrona), Snake Eyes and Jinx (Elodie Yung) – must seek out the original G.I. Joe, General Joseph Colton (Bruce Willis) to help stop Cobra Commander (Luke Bracey) from bringing his diabolical plan for world domination to fruition.

Stripped of the dumb gags and overt sci-fi trappings of its predecessor, *G.I. Joe: Retaliation* takes the film series back to its army action-figure roots and is all the better for it. If a third movie makes it to screens, we won't be complaining.

Picture: *G.I. Joe: Retaliation* joins the elite ranks of Blu-ray platters that deliver reference quality visuals.

Make no mistake about it, this is a remarkable AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode that constantly dazzles. Every individual strand of hair, every facial wrinkle and the intricate stitching in the costumes are clearly delineated and plain to see.

The image is no slouch when it comes to colour presentation, either. Primaries, such as the red outfit Jinx wears during her dojo training in Chapter 1, are richly saturated. Admittedly, there's an obvious push to the grading that gives skintones a somewhat orange tint, but this was clearly intentional on the part of the filmmakers to lend the image a warmer tone, which makes a change from the blue-biased transfers of many modern movies.

This digital presentation also manages to retain the natural filmic appearance of a movie shot on 35mm stock, with a neatly resolved layer of grain evident throughout.

Audio: If you were to try and sum up *G.I. Joe: Retaliation*'s Dolby TrueHD 7.1 soundtrack in just one word, then you can do no better than 'bombastic'. Indeed, this Blu-ray packs the kind of no-holds-barred, ultra-aggressive sound design that makes the money you've spent on your speaker setup truly worth the investment.

The precision, clarity and

Jinx's blindfolded fight was inspired by a scene in the 1987 animated *G.I. Joe* film



Ninja or not – this is clearly just an accident waiting to happen



DEMO SCREEN...

G.I. Joe: Retaliation – Extended Action Cut

Time code: 064.07 – 068.14



Leap of faith: Having drugged rival ninja Shadow Storm and carried him off in a body bag, Snake Eyes and Jinx find themselves trapped on a bridge with nowhere to go but down...



Wire work: Attaching themselves to prearranged zip-lines, the two Joes are followed by a horde of Cobra ninjas in a sequence almost made to test how your screen handles fast-moving action



Don't look down: Dazzling image fidelity and multichannel audio play a big part in selling the vertiginous showdown between the forces of G.I. Joe and Cobra on the side of an enormous cliff face



Look out below: The sequence ends with an almighty bang as Snake Eyes triggers an avalanche that threatens to shake your screen off the wall with its seismic LFE

utterly seamless integration of the surround channels means that it's possible to track the paths of individual bullets and shuriken around the soundfield. At the same time, the bass response is remarkably dynamic; pushing your subwoofer to its limits while somehow never feeling like it will swamp the rest of the mix.

Thankfully, *G.I. Joe: Retaliation*'s TrueHD track proves just as impressive during quieter scenes. Dialogue is crystal clear, the score sounds suitably expansive and there's no shortage of subtle atmospheric touches to help breathe life into the film's locations.

Extras: As Paramount has only included the 12-minute longer extended cut of the film on this UK release, this has precluded the inclusion of the chat-track by director Jon M. Chu and producer Lorenzo D. Bonaventura that accompanies the theatrical cut of the film on the regular US Blu-ray.

Thankfully, that's the only thing missing from this release, meaning that R2 buyers do still get a trio of deleted scenes and a collection of six behind-the-scenes featurettes.

Mission Briefing (10 minutes) takes a look at the goals that Paramount and Hasbro had in mind for the film (basically less sci-fi, more ninjas!);



the decision to hire Jon M. Chu as director; and the challenges posed by shooting everything in New Orleans.

Cobra Strikes (nine minutes) and *The Lone Soldiers* (eight minutes) look at the cast, weapons and sets associated with the Joes and their enemies.

The Monastery (10 minutes) explores the creation of the film's most 'bad ass' (that phrase gets thrown around a lot in these featurettes) action set-piece – see the Demo Screen boxout above. *Two Ninjas* (eight minutes) keeps the ninja action coming with a look at the making of the Snake Eyes vs. Jinx dojo sequence.

Finally, *Fort Sumter* (12 minutes) looks at shooting the film's action-packed finale at Fort Pike.



Cobra Commander manages to do what Guy Fawkes couldn't...



It's quite hard to smell what The Rock is cooking over the whiff of charred flesh



HCC VERDICT

G.I. Joe: Retaliation – Extended Action Cut

→ Paramount → All-region BD
→ £25 Approx

WE SAY: Reference-quality AV makes this sequel worth a look on BD. Go Joe!

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

ARCADE ACTION

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. Check out these two videogames vying for time on your home cinema system...

Deadpool

Activision → Xbox 360/PS3 → £40 Approx



Unless you're on a similar level to Batman or Superman, there aren't many superheroes who get to have their own videogame without having a film to promote. But fan-favourite Marvel character Deadpool isn't like most other superheroes.

For one thing he talks to himself. A lot. Rarely a moment of this game goes by without Marvel's 'Merc with a Mouth' dropping some wise-ass comment, a puerile piece of sexual innuendo or even an unexpected 'f-bomb'. He also repeatedly breaks the fourth wall, addressing the players and the developers of the game directly –

leading to some very amusing changes in game styles (including side-scrolling platformer and an 8-bit *Zelda*-style dungeon crawl) as he argues with his game creators about the budget.

But once past the zany-gags and homages, *Deadpool* is a bland, straightforward third-person shoot 'n' slash affair that has you leaping and teleporting around corridors and thinly-disguised arenas killing armies of bad guys. There's enough variety to the weapons and combat moves to keep things fun, but the limited number of enemy types to slay makes it feel even more repetitive than it really is. It also doesn't help that the controls feel loose at times – lacking the assured control of something like the *Batman: Arkham* games.



Painkiller: Hell & Damnation

Nordic Games → Xbox 360/PS3 → £30 Approx



Do you think that today's first-person-shooters have become too complicated? Do you long for the simpler days of games like *Doom* and *Quake* that just boiled down to you, some dingy corridors, plenty of guns and a never-ending horde of bad guys to kill? If so, then you're exactly who *Painkiller: Hell & Damnation* is aimed at.



Both a remake and sequel to the 2004 PC shooter *Painkiller*, this console incarnation casts you in the role of Daniel Garner, a dead man battling to free his wife from Hell by harvesting errant souls for Death. Not that any of this matters one iota. All the game

cares about is letting you wreak havoc on anything that gets in your way, and thanks to the sheer number of enemies that are thrown at you, that's an awful lot of havoc indeed. But after a few minutes' play, it becomes clear that not only does *Painkiller...* ape the design of older shooters like *Doom*, it also mimics their dismal enemy AI. Little more than hi-def cannon-fodder, the attacking hordes run at you *en masse* – and there's no visual indicator as to their health either. While this isn't such a problem with the regular enemies, it turns the boss battles into dull wars of attrition with no clear end in sight. *Painkiller...* is a tiresome reminder that there was a very good reason why many of these gameplay concepts were left behind in the first place.



Space Battleship Yamato

Manga → Region B BD
→ £25 Approx



There's a definite whiff of the *Battlestar Galactica* reboot to this live-action Japanese sci-fi blockbuster based on the 1970s anime series of the same name.

Though a little uneven in tone, the film's relentless pace and impressive visual effects make it an enjoyable, action-packed ride – and it also makes for a very satisfying Blu-ray experience thanks to a stellar AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode and thunderous DTS-HD MA 5.1/LPCM 5.1 soundtracks. We only wish there were more extras on offer.



Runaway Train

Arrow Video → Region B BD/R2 DVD
£23 Approx



Fans of Andrei Konchalovsky's superior 1985 action-thriller about a pair of escaped convicts (Jon Voight and Eric Roberts) trapped on a runaway train will be thrilled by this hi-def platter.

While the visuals have some minor source-related issues, the AVC 1.85:1 1080p encode looks pleasingly crisp and stable. The LPCM 2.0 track is just as good, capturing the full force and fury of the film's original stereo sound design perfectly. Quality extras include a quartet of interviews and a booklet containing the original *Life* magazine article that inspired the movie.



The ABCs of Death

Monster Pictures → Region B BD
£20 Approx



26 horror directors were each assigned one letter of the alphabet and asked to make a short film about a subject that begins with their letter. The results may be wildly uneven

(there's just no excuse for *F is for Fart*) but they're never boring – and the handful of real standouts (such as *D is for Dogfight* or *L is for Libido*) make it worth persevering with. The AVC 1.78:1 1080p imagery and DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio are generally fine given the source material and the Blu-ray is loaded with extras.





This is why you should always wash your salad leaves

Bigger they are, the harder they fall

Fee-fi-fo-fum, Bryan Singer's \$200million 3D fairy tale blockbuster left us feeling pretty glum

→ JACK THE GIANT SLAYER 3D

Given the recent craze for giving fairy tales the Hollywood blockbuster treatment, it was only inevitable that somebody would get around to making an action-fantasy version of *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Yet we had hoped that the resulting \$200million film from director Bryan 'X-Men' Singer wouldn't be quite so dumb and predictable.

Like Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* before it, Singer's *Jack the Giant Slayer* thinks it's enough to simply load its thinly-written narrative with lavish special effects before ending things with a massive battle. What you end up with is a by-the-numbers blockbuster that doesn't have an original idea to speak of, lacks anything in the way of three-dimensional characters and is so tonally all over the place that it's too gruesome for kids and too childish for adults. Even more annoying is that the talented cast (Ewan McGregor, Nicholas Hoult, Ian McShane) is utterly wasted. Stick to the story book.

Picture: Unlike the film, *Jack the Giant Slayer*'s 2D and 3D 1080p encodes do not disappoint.

The 'flat' AVC 2.40:1 presentation is in a word, perfect. Colours are rich and vibrant, and detailing is refined enough to pick out the stitching in Jack's hoodie and the myriad scars on both faces of the two-headed giant Fallon. And, best of all, there's no intrusive banding or artefacting to halt your appreciation of the hi-def imagery.



For the most part this impeccable level of quality is maintained by the 3D MVC 2.40:1 encode. Indeed, the biggest issue with this version is that – despite being shot in native 3D – many sequences look flat and uninvolved. When it's put to good use (say, the giants leaping down the beanstalk in Chapter 9),

the stereoscopic effect is breathtaking. But those instances are ultimately too few and too far apart. **Audio:** As you'd expect, the 2D and 3D platters offered up by this Blu-ray release are joined by identical DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundtracks. Given the film's subject matter, we expected pretty big things from the audio – and it didn't let us down. From the booming bass that accompanies the footsteps of the giants to immersive directional effects that make frequent use of your entire speaker setup, this is a cracking, larger-than-life, lossless track.

Extras: The sense of disappointment surrounding *Jack the Giant Slayer* returns when you check out the Blu-ray's bonus features (only present on the 2D platter – the accompanying 3D disc is barebones).

While there are eight behind-the-scenes featurettes on offer, they suffer from being far too short to look at any aspect of the production in real depth. And, even worse, you can't access them directly from the menu, instead having to navigate your way around a tedious 'interactive' beanstalk in order to find them.

The only other extras to be found are four deleted scenes (including an alternate opening in animatic form) and a gag reel.



Nick Hoult is reteaming with Bryan Singer for next year's *X-Men: Days of Future Past*



HCC VERDICT

Jack the Giant Slayer 3D

→ Warner Home Video

→ All-region BD → £28 Approx

WE SAY: Not even spectacular picture and sound can help this disappointing flick climb any higher on Blu-ray

Movie ★★☆☆☆

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★☆☆☆

Overall ★★☆☆☆

Have you ever been so drunk that you can't tell which hand your drink is in?



DISC
OF THE
MONTH



'Oh girls, they wanna have fun'

A quartet of good girls act very bad indeed in this controversial and electrifying comedy-drama



The latest Sugarbabes line-up raised a few eyebrows

→ **SPRING BREAKERS**

When college friends Faith (Selena Gomez), Brit (Ashley Benson), Candy (Vanessa Hudgens) and Cotty (Rachel Korine) discover that their Spring Break vacation in Florida might be put on hold due to a lack of money, they do what any sensible young ladies would do. They rob a fast-food restaurant.

Empowered by this crime and free of any responsibilities, the quartet hit their vacation at full throttle, partying their little hearts out. But a meeting with a local rapper and gangster called Alien (James Franco) sets them on an entirely new path that will push them to their limits.

Harmony Korine's portrait of 21st Century American youth presents us with a searing vision of flesh and violence. It's a challenging film, but one that rewards you with its chilling, witty and sometimes tender portrayal of a generation lost in a landscape of superficial, hedonistic concerns.

Picture: Working with Gaspar Noe's regular cinematographer Benoît Debie, Harmony Korine cooks up a neon-lit, candy-coloured nightmare with *Spring Breaker's* AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode. Colour saturation is nothing short of dazzling, fine object detail is excellent and the disc handles the film's heavy grain with aplomb.

Audio: Just as *Spring Breakers* isn't your typical, everyday movie, so it is that the film's sound design is equally unconventional.

So, while it's true that dialogue and narration both play a key role in the film's soundtrack (and are delivered perfectly by the Blu-ray's DTS-HD Master Audio 5.1 track), the major driving force in the mix is actually the music. And it sounds unbelievably good.

Composed by Skrillex and Cliff Martinez, the film's dynamic score provides the tempo that drives the film forward, drawing you into the chaotic narrative as it weaves its way around the entire soundstage with a ferocious energy.

However, it's not all big bass beats and pounding percussion. The mix proves just as acoustically adept and even more absorbing in its quieter moments – a prime example being the brilliantly creepy yet touching moment

when James Franco's Alien tinkles the ivories and regales his new girl gang with a performance of Britney Spears' *Everytime*.

Extras: The Blu-ray disc features a chat-track from Korine alongside a *Making of...* doc, a short reel of raw behind-the-scenes footage, brief featurettes about the film's director and stars, premiere footage and the theatrical trailer. The bonus DVD adds the three-part *Breaking it Down: Behind Spring Breakers* documentary, a deleted scene, outtakes and a music featurette. ➤



HCC VERDICT

Spring Breakers

→ Universal Pictures

→ All-region BD/RO DVD → £25 Approx

WE SAY: A superb package ensures that this unconventional drama hits plenty of highs on your home cinema

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



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The White Queen

Anchor Bay → Region B BD
£40 Approx



Sex, scheming and a *souçon* of sorcery lie at the heart of the BBC's enjoyably daft adaptation of Philippa

Gregory's best-selling historical novels set during the War of the Roses. The four-disc set's AVC 1.78:1 1080i encodes do a fine job of highlighting the show's gorgeous costumes and even more gorgeous cast. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes handle the heavy-handed score with ease while prioritising dialogue skillfully. Although it's a shame that the BBC's recent two-part doc *The Real White Queen* hasn't been included as an extra, you do get a *Making of...* and interview with Gregory.



Falling Skies: Season Two

Warner Home Video → All-region BD
£35 Approx



After a dismal first season, this Steven Spielberg-produced alien invasion series shows clear signs of

improvement across this second batch of 10 episodes. Actually, from the polished AVC 1.78:1 1080p encodes to the cinematic nature of the show's Dolby TrueHD 5.1 soundtracks, pretty much everything about this release is an improvement on the previous Blu-ray boxset. And while it may offer one less episode commentary (only four as opposed to *Season One's* five), it makes up for this with a surfeit of behind-the-scenes featurettes.



Archer: Season Three

20th Century Fox → Region A/B BD
£25 Approx



Buried away on 5USA here in the UK, there's a good chance that most people are still unaware of this hilarious

animated spy spoof – so thank heavens for Blu-ray. Indeed, 20th Century Fox's stunning hi-def releases remain the best way to watch the show, and this latest two-disc set is no exception. The AVC 1.78:1 1080p encodes across all 13 episodes are nigh-on flawless, with excellent colour fidelity and crisp delineation throughout. The DTS-HD MA 5.1 sonics also impress with their clarity and potency. And while the extras are a little thin on the ground, they are almost as fun as the show itself.



Banshee: Season One

HBO Home Entertainment
→ All-region BD → £45 Approx



Now here's a strong contender for 2013's biggest guilty pleasure. This testosterone-laden tale of a former criminal

masquerading as a small-town sheriff is the kind of pulp TV series that pulls you in with its lurid mix of violence and sex, but keeps you hooked with its colourful cast of characters and unpredictable storylines. As you'd expect from an HBO release (even one for a Cinemax series such as this), *Banshee* has been given exemplary treatment on Blu-ray. The AVC 1.78:1 1080p visuals and DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio are both excellent – and there's no shortage of quality bonus features.



Hi-def adventures in time and space

The only vintage *Doctor Who* serial to be shot entirely on film materialises on Blu-ray

→ DOCTOR WHO: SPEARHEAD FROM SPACE

This brilliant 1970 serial is notable for marking a number of firsts for *Doctor Who*. For one thing, it marks the debut appearance of John Pertwee as the third incarnation of the Doctor. The story also introduces those deadly shop window dummies, the Autons. And on top of that, it was also the first *Doctor Who* story ever to be shot in colour.

But perhaps the most striking thing of all is that it was the only story from the original run of the series to be shot entirely on location and on film. Which, of course, means that it's the only vintage BBC *Doctor Who* serial that would merit a release on Blu-ray – which is exactly what BBC Worldwide has done as part of the show's 50th anniversary celebrations.

Picture: This Blu-ray release comes on the back of two previous DVDs outings for *Spearhead from Space* – first of all as one of the very earliest *Doctor Who* DVDs back in early 2001, followed by a transfer taken from a newly struck interpositive as part of the 2010 *Mannequin Mania* boxset.

Citing developments in tools and workflows at BBC Studios & Post Production over the past couple of years, the Doctor Who Restoration Team has been able to go back to the original 16mm cut negatives for this HD platter, and the result is remarkable.

The AVC 1.33:1 1080i encode arrives in a blaze of colour, with vibrant primaries offset against deep, lustrous blacks. Grain is also handled much better here than it ever was on DVD – and there's plenty of it to be seen given the serial's 16mm origins. This has the knock-on effect of considerably improving both



John quickly came to regret ordering the fresh calamari

clarity and fine detail visible in the image. The serial has also been given a slightly moodier grade this time around, which suits the material rather well.

That's not to say that it's perfect. There are a few imperfections, such as the occasional hair trapped in the gate, that make their presence felt. But overall this is a very commendable effort.

Audio: The disc's DTS-HD MA dual-mono track also holds its own well. Dialogue and music presentation are both outstanding and – importantly for some – the original stuttering TARDIS materialisation noise removed from the first episode on the previous DVD release is restored here.

Extras: Designed to complement, rather than replace the 2010 DVD, this Blu-ray replicates none of the extras from that platter. Instead it serves up superb documentaries about actors John Pertwee and Caroline John, a restoration comparison and a lengthy reel of test footage for the title sequence. ➤



HCC VERDICT

**Doctor Who:
Spearhead from Space**

→ BBC Worldwide

→ All-region BD → £23 Approx

WE SAY: A must-own hi-def platter for any fan of the BBC's time traveller

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★



Remastering the kung fu Master

Warner revisits Bruce Lee's best-known film on Blu-ray with spectacular results

→ ENTER THE DRAGON

Enter the Dragon is far from being Bruce Lee's best movie. Lacking the fury, fluidity and creativity of his trio of Asian martial arts films, this 1973 effort often feels like a fairly standard post-007 Hollywood action flick that just happens to have had Bruce Lee dropped into it.

But there's no getting away from the fact that *Enter the Dragon* is the actor's best-known and most influential movie. It's also the one that cemented him as an international superstar – albeit posthumously, following his premature death just six days before the film became a box office sensation.

Picture: Long gone are the unsightly aliasing, macroblocking, washed-out blacks and limp colours that plagued Warner Home Video's original Blu-ray release of *Enter the Dragon*. In their place we have a brand-new AVC 2.40:1 1080p encode that actually looks like a modestly budgeted '70s action flick.

Naturally, the very nature of the source material means that *Enter the Dragon* is never going to deliver a knock-out punch in terms of picture quality. However, it's hard to imagine getting a more accurate or authentic presentation of the film than this. Colours are much more robust, grain is refined and the detailing is as good as the frequently soft imagery could possibly allow.

Audio: The soundtrack has been upgraded from lossy Dolby Digital 5.1 to lossless DTS-HD MA 5.1 for this new release. Once again the limitations of the

Bruce would get very angry whenever anybody questioned the wisdom of his indoor water wheel



source material come into effect, but you can't deny the extra impact the new mix brings to the sound effects and Lalo Schiffrin's memorable score.

Extras: Not only does this disc include all of the many, many extras from the previous Blu-ray release of *Enter the Dragon*, it also adds three new ones. *No Way as Way* (26 minutes) is yet another look at Lee's life and career, *Return to Han's Island* (10 minutes) tours the film's locations, and *Wing Chun: The Art that Introduced Kung Fu to Bruce Lee* (20 minutes) explores the titular martial art.

The Blu-ray's oversized slipcase also houses eight collectible postcards – including a replica 'Deputy of the Dragon' card handed out at the film's premiere.

HCC VERDICT

Enter the Dragon: Ultimate Collector's Edition

→ Warner Home Video
→ All-region BD → £25 Approx
WE SAY: A massive improvement on the previous Blu-ray – buy it now!

Movie ★★★★★

Picture ★★★★★

Audio ★★★★★

Extras ★★★★★

Overall ★★★★★

The Birth of a Nation

Eureka: The Masters of Cinema Series
→ Region B BD → £25 Approx



D.W. Griffith's silent 1915 blockbuster about the American Civil War and its aftermath in the South is one of the most unapologetically racist movies you will ever see. At the

same time, it's impossible to overstate its importance in the development of narrative filmmaking, and therefore remains a film that merits continued study and discussion – something this Blu-ray makes all the more palatable with its beautifully restored and tinted AVC 1.33:1 1080p visuals, plus its choice of DTS-HD MA 2.0 and 5.1 orchestral scores. Quality extras include seven additional silent shorts and an in-depth documentary.



Plein Soleil

StudioCanal → Region B BD
£23 Approx



Based on a brand-new 4K restoration produced in association with the Cinémathèque Française, we had

high hopes for this HD outing of René Clément's 1960 adaptation of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Sadly, something clearly went wrong between the restoration itself and the production of this BD. While free from dirt and damage, the AVC 1.66:1 1080p encode has been heavily filtered (removing grain and detail) and contrast boosted. The accompanying interviews make use of clips that haven't been treated this way and show how the film should really look!



Nowhere

Second Sight → R0 DVD
£16 Approx



Originally described by its maker as 'Beverly Hills 90210 on acid' this 1997 closer to Greg Araki's 'Teenage

Apocalypse Trilogy' doesn't quite measure up to its predecessors, but remains an oddly enjoyable trash cinema curio packed with a cast list of future stars. While this DVD's anamorphic 1.85:1 transfer and Dolby 2.0 soundtrack are both perfectly serviceable, the real highlight is the new commentary by Araki and three of the cast. Packed with anecdotes about the risks of acting while stoned and salacious tales about their co-stars, it's fresh and funny from start to finish.





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4K

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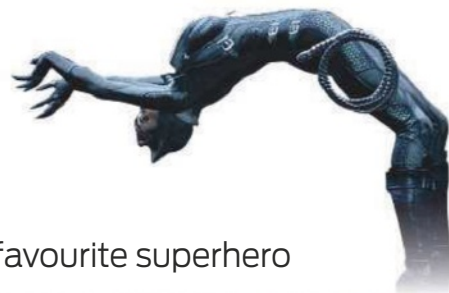
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FILM FRANCHISE

Batman

In the first of a new series, we give you the lowdown on cinema's favourite superhero



Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy has redefined what audiences expect from a superhero flick



IT SAYS SOMETHING that it took the combined might of Iron Man, Thor, Captain America, the Hulk, Hawkeye and the Black Widow to topple Batman from his place as box office king of the superheroes. Indeed, it seems that there's something about artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger's comic book creation that makes him even more suited to onscreen action (both big and small) than his contemporaries.



From his first outing in 1939, it only took four years for Batman to appear on the big screen with 1943's eponymously titled 15-part serial.

Another serial, *Batman and Robin*, followed four years later – but it was the 1960s TV series starring Adam West that transformed the character into a pop culture phenomenon. This in turn resulted in Batman's jump to the world of animation, where he

The iconic '60s TV series still isn't out on DVD due to rights issues

continues to thrill fans today through kid-friendly 'toons like Cartoon Network's *Beware the Batman*, alongside made-for-BD/DVD movies aimed at older viewers such as the recent *The Dark Knight Returns*.

Bigscreen Batmania

Yet it's in the world of live-action cinema where Batman has found his biggest success. Tim Burton's 1989 movie redefined the character for filmgoers, transforming him into the biggest blockbuster star around. More



The last laugh: To prepare for his role as The Joker in *The Dark Knight*, Heath Ledger reportedly secluded himself away in a motel room for six weeks in order to delve into the psychology of the character.

Boy Wonder: The original script for Tim Burton's *Batman* featured the origin of Robin. Both the Blu-ray and Special Edition DVD include a reconstruction of the scene using animated storyboards.



recently, Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy has taken both the character and the superhero genre to a whole new level. Marrying extravagant action with intelligent storytelling, Batman's cinematic adventures of the last decade have become indispensable BD purchases for home cinema fans everywhere.

And it's not over yet, with studio Warner Bros recently announcing that the *Man of Steel* sequel will pit Superman against Batman. Will he still be donning the cape come his 100th birthday in 2039? Don't bet against it.

PICK OF THE BEST...

1 The Dark Knight

If *Batman Begins* saw Christopher Nolan prove that the franchise could be rehabilitated for the silver screen, then this sequel found him redefining what a comic book movie should be. *The Dark Knight* is a superb crime thriller populated by fascinating and flawed characters – the fact that it also boasts plenty of breathtaking action scenes is just the icing on the cake.

2 Batman: Mask of the Phantasm

This 1993 bigscreen spin-off from the acclaimed *Batman: The Animated Series* retains the style and smarts that made the TV show such a success. While it may have bombed at the box office, it remains a firm favourite with Bat-fans.

3 Batman Returns

Tim Burton's first Batman blockbuster was the bigger hit at cinemas, but this sequel is a better meld of the source material and the filmmaker's off-kilter sensibilities. And it's got Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman in it. Meeoow!

AND THE WORST...

Batman & Robin

While Burton took the best elements from the 1980s comics as inspiration for his pair of *Batman* films, Joel Schumacher looked back to the gaudy 1960s TV series for his two sequels. *Batman Forever* was just about bearable, but *Batman & Robin* pushed the tongue-in-cheek humour and gaudy '60s-style design into overdrive – and killed the franchise stone dead.

COLLECTIBLES

No self-respecting Bat-fan can afford to miss out on these...

The Dark Knight Returns



Easily the most influential Batman comic of the past three decades, Frank Miller's four-part epic tells the story of a 55-year old Batman coming out of retirement.

Batman: Arkham Origins



The third instalment in the *Batman: Arkham* videogame series hits shelves on October 25 and (as the title suggests) takes us back to Batman's early days fighting crime.

Available for PS3, Xbox 360, PC and Wii U.

Lego DC Universe Super Heroes: The Batcave



'Where does he get those wonderful toys?' asked The Joker in Tim Burton's *Batman*. Well, in the case of this incredible Lego playset, you can pick it up from most good retailers for £70...

Batman Premium Format Figure



Standing over two feet tall, Sideshow Collectibles' handcrafted 1:4 scale statue will strike fear into the hearts of evil-doers everywhere – and look rather natty in your home cinema room. Pick him up for around £350.

THE ULTIMATE COLLECTION...

Your guide to the very best of Batman available to buy on Blu-ray and DVD...

Batman: The Complete 1943 Movie Serial Collection (R1 DVD – US Import)

Batman and Robin: The Complete 1949 Movie Serial Collection (R1 DVD – US Import)

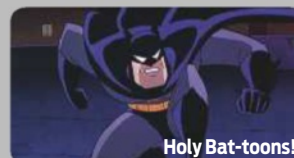
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Batman: Mask of the Phantasm (R2 DVD)

Batman & Mr. Freeze:



SubZero (R1 DVD)

The Batman Superman Movie (R2 DVD)

Batman: Mystery of the Batwoman (All-region BD – US Import)

Batman: Gotham Knight (All-region BD)

Superman/Batman: Public Enemies (All-region BD – US Import)

Batman: Under the Red Hood (All-region BD – US Import)

Superman/Batman: Apocalypse (All-region BD – US Import)

Batman: Year One (All-region BD – US Import)

The Dark Knight Trilogy: Ultimate Collector's Edition (All-region BD – 23rd September)

Lego Batman: The Movie – DC Super Heroes Unite (All-region BD – US Import)

Batman: The Dark Knight Returns – Deluxe Edition (All-region BD – US Import – 8th October)



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The European Imaging & Sound Association AWARDS 2013–2014



The annual EISA Awards celebrate the best of the best in home entertainment technology – make sure the following products are on your audition list

The European Imaging and Sound Association (EISA) is the technology world's largest independent awards panel, incorporating 50 specialist magazines from across the continent – including *Home Cinema Choice*. Its goal is simple: to celebrate the most desirable, highest-performing home entertainment hardware that you – the AV enthusiasts – will be spending your hard-earned pennies on.

The featured awards here are the selections from the Video Panel and the Audio & Home Theatre Panel, covering everything from flatscreen TVs to Blu-ray players, speakers, projectors and AV receivers. Chosen after a lengthy judging process throughout the Summer, during which the member magazines convene and whittle down a shortlist, these can be considered the cream of the consumer electronics crop. Read on...

**EUROPEAN HT
LOUDSPEAKER 2013-2014****KEF E305**

KEF's revamped 'egg' 5.1 package is ideal for a discreet home theatre system. Its secret weapon is the brand's proprietary Uni-Q driver, which combines a 115mm woofer and 19mm aluminium dome tweeter in a coaxial design to create a precise sound image from its five small satellite speakers. Adding realistic, deep bass is the partnering 250W active subwoofer with its long-throw 200mm driver and whose design merges seamlessly with the surround enclosures. The E305 is neatly conceived, easy to install, simple to use and provides an impressively broad but still accurate performance with film soundtracks. It's also a natural performer with music material, making it a great all-round solution.



**EUROPEAN HT
RECEIVER 2013-2014****Sony STR-DA5800ES**

Sony's flagship receiver sports a heavyweight design and build but brings finesse to its multichannel performance ensuring that movie soundtracks and music alike are delivered with vivid detail and bags of energy. The 9.2-channel STR-DA5800ES is also feature-packed, offering nine HDMI inputs and three outputs, an asynchronous USB input, built-in network switching and, uniquely for an AVR, video-on-demand courtesy of the Sony Entertainment Network. Powerful on-board audio processing enables centre channel Lift Up and Virtual Height functionality to ease installation, while media playback includes support for 192kHz/24-bit FLAC and WAV files. Add in the gorgeous and intuitive graphic user interface and effective auto-calibration regime and the result is an inspired new addition to Sony's home cinema line-up.





EUROPEAN HT UNIVERSAL PLAYER 2013-2014

OPPO BDP-103EU

OPPO's BDP-103EU is a state-of-the-art Blu-ray player, matching a luxurious, heavyweight build quality with an astonishing range of features. In addition to two HDMI outputs, external sources can take advantage of the player's high-grade processing via its twin HDMI inputs, while USB, Ethernet and Wi-Fi capability make it easy to play back your own media files. As a universal deck, the OPPO will happily spin Super Audio CDs and DVD-Audio discs as well as Blu-rays – its performance, aided by extensive user adjustments, is sublime. 4K upscaling and HDMI passthrough mean it can be combined with the latest high-end displays at the heart of a home cinema.

**EUROPEAN PROJECTOR
2013-2014****JVC DLA-X55R**

Designed for home theatre enthusiasts, the DLA-X55R offers an unprecedented picture quality for its price point.

Light output and native contrast are highly impressive, while the colour reproduction is nuanced and natural. Sharpness is another strength, with JVC's second-generation 'e-Shift2' detail enhancement technology displaying Full HD content with an astonishing level of detail that comes close to an Ultra HD sensation.

Installation of the DLA-X55R is helped by its comprehensive setup features, including motorised horizontal and vertical lens shift, a 2x zoom and Lens Memory function, plus extensive calibration options and a range of excellent preset viewing modes.



**EUROPEAN HT HIGH-END
2013-2014****Krell Foundation**

A 7.1-channel processor/preamp with state-of-the-art digital processing and features, the Krell Foundation is aimed at home theatre enthusiasts for whom only the very best will suffice. A total of 10 HDMI inputs and two outputs provide setup flexibility, including instantaneous source switching, while the brand's proprietary ARES room EQ system tailors sound performance to the listening environment. Owners of compatible amplifiers can make use of its balanced outputs. As expected from a high-end product, design and build quality is faultless, and the slim form factor means it can be accommodated easily. In action the Foundation delivers multichannel audio with amazing clarity and precision and passes video signals with unerring accuracy.



**EUROPEAN STEREO
SYSTEM 2013-2014****Pioneer PD-50/A-70**

Stereo separates are not only becoming more popular again, they are also becoming much more flexible and Pioneer's PD-50 disc player and partnering A-70 amplifier show us how. The PD-50 spins CD and audiophile SACD discs while also including a front-mounted USB port for playing music off a memory stick. Around the back, there are digital inputs to boost the performance of external digital devices. Meanwhile, the A-70 not only boasts a full 90W power output but its Class D amplification ensures this is achieved as efficiently as possible with a robust and rhythmic sound. The fact that Pioneer's A-70 also includes conventional digital and asynchronous USB audio connections confirms its status as an impressive hi-fi hub.



EUROPEAN HOME CINEMA TV 2013-2014**Panasonic VIERA TX-P60ZT65**

Panasonic's TX-P60ZT65 is the new reference for plasma TVs thanks to its new single-glass Studio Master Panel, which guarantees low reflections and clear, sharp images from any angle. This 60-inch display delivers a truly cinematic experience with superb black levels, outstanding contrast and brightness, and smooth motion handling. Colours, meanwhile, are effortlessly natural, and the TV's professional-level calibration options mean its performance can be fine-tuned to perfection. As well as its peerless picture quality, the TX-P60ZT65 offers a range of Smart TV features, including wireless media streaming and the customizable My Home Screen interface. The premium build quality and the screen's slender design also impress.



**EUROPEAN HT SOLUTION
2013-2014****Loewe Individual 55 Slim Frame/3D
Orchestra 5.1 IS**

Loewe always strives to provide home entertainment systems that mix premium design and ease of use with a quality audio-visual experience, and this combination is no different. The new Individual 55 Slim Frame TV offers Active 3D playback, an integrated PVR and Smart TV features, plus personalised style options to tailor it for any living room. The 3D Orchestra 5.1 IS, meanwhile, uses an array of wireless speakers with omnidirectional dispersion, ensuring an immersive surround sound performance, with a tight bass delivery from the dedicated 200W subwoofer. With no need for an external processor, as decoding is handled by the Loewe TV, this is an appealing fuss-free solution.

**EUROPEAN ULTRA HD TV
2013-2014****Philips 65PFL9708**

Offering four times the resolution of Full HD, Ultra HD is clearly the future of home entertainment, and the Philips 65PFL9708 is an accomplished and surprisingly affordable debut from the brand. With Ultra HD content it offers astonishing depth and clarity and its upscaling talents improve the quality of Blu-ray, DVD and direct broadcast sources. Passive 3D images on this 65-inch TV also look razor-sharp thanks to the screen's greater resolution. Other picture quality highlights include a robust edge LED system and superb brightness, contrast and motion performance, while Ambilight XL illumination makes the whole experience more immersive.

**EUROPEAN GREEN TV
2013-2014****Philips 50PFL5008**

In a market of ever-increasing screen sizes, Philips continues to maintain its standing as an environmentally friendly brand. The Philips 50PFL5008 carries on this ethos, outperforming the competition with reduced energy consumption and efficient use of environmentally relevant materials in its printed circuit boards. The Philips brand extends its winning streak by earning the EISA Green Award again this year.



EUROPEAN TV 2013-2014**Sony BRAVIA KDL-55W905A**

With the KDL-55W905A, Sony has unleashed its new Triluminos LED display and a second generation of its processing engine X-Reality Pro. The result is a faultless picture performance with vibrant, lifelike colours and superb motion clarity that suits sports, movies and games, while the long-duct speaker system delivers excellent audio, too. A new, fast user interface makes the TV easy to operate, as do features like the NFC-enabled remote and TV SideView app. A thin aluminium bezel and eye-catching stand give the KDL-55W905A its distinctive 'Sense of Quartz' look. An excellent choice for the demanding consumer.



**EUROPEAN SMART TV
2013-2014****Samsung UE55F8000**

Offering four times the resolution of Full HD, Ultra HD is clearly the future of home entertainment, and the Philips 65PFL9708 is an accomplished and surprisingly affordable debut from the brand. With Ultra HD content it offers astonishing depth and clarity and its upscaling talents improve the quality of Blu-ray, DVD and direct broadcast sources. Passive 3D images on this 65-inch TV also look razor-sharp thanks to the screen's greater resolution. Other picture quality highlights include a robust edge LED system and superb brightness, contrast and motion performance, while Ambilight XL illumination makes the whole experience more immersive.

**EUROPEAN DESIGN TV
2013-2014****LG 55EA980W**

If you want a TV that stands out from the crowd then LG's curved 55EA980W is the one for you. A flatscreen that isn't actually flat, thanks to the use of OLED (Organic Light Emitting Diode) technology, the LG offers a cutting-edge, stylish and super-slim design, with the display seemingly floating on its transparent stand that includes nearly invisible speakers. LG's OLED implementation (which uses an additional white pixel) brings performance benefits too; this TV offers an ultra-high contrast with deep black levels and searing bright whites, an extremely wide viewing angle and vivid colours. 3D and Smart TV features are of course also included, and the curved shape provides a unique viewing experience.

**EUROPEAN CAMCORDER
2013-2014****JVC GC-PX100**

This is an accomplished hybrid design, offering both versatile Full HD camcorder and still image camera in a lightweight, small and easy-to-use design, with a detachable viewfinder, optical image stabilizer and accessory ports among its useful features. The F1.2 lens, combined with a highly efficient CMOS sensor, ensures excellent performance in low-light conditions. High-speed recording up to 500 fps and slow-motion playback makes it ideal for capturing fast-moving action. JVC's innovative CAM Coach App is also a great editing/tagging tool for sports analysis. The GC-PX100's built-in Wi-Fi enables quick sharing of footage and flexible control via tablet or smartphone.



EUROPEAN LOUDSPEAKER 2013-2014**Sonus faber Venere 2.5**

Inspired by its high-end Aida loudspeaker, the Venere 2.5 is the more affordable of two floorstanding models in Sonus faber's new range. The sweeping aesthetic of the Venere 2.5 with its tilted apex topped in glass and double curve of its cabinet walls combines beauty with great strength, controlling any unwanted vibrations from its two bass/mid units. Treble is handled by a 29mm fabric-dome tweeter, helping to deliver music that's vivid and colourful but also refined and undemanding over long listening sessions. The Venere 2.5 is available in stunning piano black or white finishes in addition to polished wood veneers. This is a loudspeaker that succeeds in pleasing both the eye and the ear.

**EUROPEAN HT INNOVATION 2013-2014****Philips Fidelio HTL9100**

The Philips HTL9100 is no ordinary soundbar. If needed, the detachable, battery-powered side speakers can be put anywhere in the room where they will receive rear-channel sound wirelessly, providing true 'Surround On Demand' via the onboard Dolby and DTS 5.1 decoders. With the subwoofer also working wirelessly, and connectivity including Bluetooth for music streaming, two HDMI inputs and an ARC-compatible output, installation is fast and foolproof. Philips' Smart Equalization sensor will also adjust the soundbar's sound depending on whether it is mounted to a wall or flat on a stand. An energetic, detailed audio performance and slim, unobtrusive design completes this forward-thinking, innovative product. Hook it up to your TV and enjoy...

**EUROPEAN DIGITAL AUDIO PLAYER 2013-2014****Marantz NA-11S1**

If networked audio systems have typically been designed for convenience rather than ultimate sound quality then this new digital audio player from Marantz marks a turning point in the evolution of home hi-fi. In addition to offering USB Type A and B sockets – for iDevices, memory sticks and connection to a PC or Mac – the NA-11S1 includes an Ethernet port for access to a NAS drive or to become part of your wired home network. The new DSD-over-USB protocol is also supported. Naturally, AirPlay and DLNA connectivity is included, so you can wirelessly stream music from your computer or mobile device. The player is immaculately finished while its subtle, smooth and intricately detailed sound is always musical, setting an enviable standard. Without doubt, the NA-11S1 is a supreme streamer.



EUROPEAN MICRO AUDIO SYSTEM 2013-2014**LG CM3430**

There's a lot more audio technology packed into LG's compact, wireless audio system than first meets the eye. A full 2.1 channel loudspeaker system with two sub-bass drivers is incorporated into the body of the CM3430, purposefully driven via a 40W Class D amplifier. Its super slim casework comes in a variety of colours and plays host to a slot-loading CD player, FM radio and a USB port that supports playback of uncompressed music files. Depending on territory, DAB radio versions are also available. For even greater flexibility, you can stream music via Bluetooth or AirPlay. Whatever your choice of source, the versatile CM3430 punches well above its weight with a surprisingly grand and engaging sound that belies its discreet appearance.

**EUROPEAN COMPACT HI-FI SYSTEM****Panasonic SC-PMX9**

Proving that the ultimate in wireless connectivity need not mean unnecessary complexity, Panasonic's SC-PMX9 manages to offer full compatibility with your DLNA home network while supporting music media streamed via Bluetooth or AirPlay. Panasonic's Music Streaming app, available for Android and iOS devices, puts you in full control of your listening pleasure but as the SC-PMX9 is also a comprehensive hi-fi system you also have the choice of playback via CD, digital radio and USB stick in addition to the fully integrated iPod/iPhone dock. The partnering three-way loudspeakers deliver a wonderfully rich sound thanks, in part, to the proprietary Class D amplifier tucked inside the SC-PMX9 that leverages off Panasonic's proven MASH noise-shaping technology. Whether your preference is for wireless or wired sound sources, Panasonic's SC-PMX9 is a thoroughly modern solution.

EUROPEAN WIRELESS HI-FI HEADPHONE 2013-2014**AKG K935**

If you want to enjoy the sound of your hi-fi system privately, but without being tethered to a headphone socket, then AKG's K935 wireless 'phone is the perfect solution. The base unit, which can be wall-mounted, includes hidden magnets that hold the headphone in place while they charge, allowing for up to eight hours of remote listening enjoyment over a high quality 2.4GHz wireless connection. RCA and 3.5mm analogue inputs are fitted along with a sensitivity switch to accommodate a wide variety of music sources. Not only does the K935 develop a very detailed, spacious and sympathetic sound, but its soft and compliant velvet ear pads and light weight ensure the headphone is equally comfortable to wear.





EUROPEAN WIRELESS SPEAKER SYSTEM 2013-2014

DALI KUBIK FREE

With its new Kubik Free series of miniature two-way loudspeakers, Dali is putting the fun back into functionality. The self-powered Kubik Free loudspeaker connects wirelessly to any Bluetooth music streaming device, its onboard amplifiers delivering a deliciously sweet sound from Dali's proprietary wood-fibre bass/mid driver and soft-dome tweeter. Of course, the Kubik Free also includes wired USB and optical inputs – perfect for partnering with your TV – and stereo connections for all legacy audio devices. A multi-pin connection allows your Kubik Free to power a second, passive version of the speaker called the Kubik Free Xtra while a subwoofer output is included to service a full 2.1 channel audio system. Finally, with a choice of wrap-around grille colours, the Kubik will blend seamlessly into any modern living space.

EUROPEAN HT SOUNDBAR 2013-2014

Bowers & Wilkins Panorama 2

Bowers & Wilkins' Panorama 2 clearly carries the brand's audio heritage – this is a high-end soundbar with a remarkably smooth, detailed and nuanced performance that constantly impresses. Within its curved and well-built chassis are nine newly-designed drivers powered by Class D amplifiers, arranged to ensure a wide dispersion so that no one misses out on the action. Connectivity on the Panorama 2 is extensive, with a trio of HDMI inputs and an ARC-compatible HDMI output making it easy to hookup a Blu-ray player, console, set-top box and your flatscreen TV. With its Panorama 2, Bowers & Wilkins has delivered the perfect mix of style, convenience and audio quality.



EUROPEAN HIGH-END AUDIO 2013-2014**T+A MP 3000 HV/PA 3000 HV**

EISA's High-End Audio award can only be earned by products that combine the very best in hi-fi engineering with superlative sound quality and this year, T+A's astonishing HV (High Voltage) series is the stand-out winner. Built into massive, but immaculately finished aluminium chassis, the pair consists of the MP 3000 HV digital media player and PA 3000 HV integrated amplifier. The player has a high-end DAC at its core, includes a plethora of digital inputs, a built-in CD drive, UPnP network client for computer-sourced music streaming, internet radio functionality and an FM tuner for good measure. The partnering amplifier is rated at a substantial 300W but is no less sophisticated as the entire system can be controlled via T+A's splendid two-way FDI00 handset, complete with display. The HV series is the embodiment of high-end style and substance!

**EUROPEAN USB DAC 2013-2014****Meridian Explorer**

Computers are ideal for storing your favourite music but they are not designed with hi-fi in mind. Meridian's portable Explorer DAC bridges this gap by accessing audio files up to 24-bit/192kHz via the computer's USB output and converting them into glorious stereo music. The Explorer is powered directly from the USB hub, so there's no need for batteries or external supplies, includes three LEDs that provide an indication of audio file sample rate and offers two 3.5mm outputs. One combines a fixed-level analogue with an optical digital output, while the other is purpose-designed to drive headphones via its integral analogue volume control. The very natural and transparent sound of the Explorer is as sophisticated as its all-aluminium case is stylish, bringing a taste of the high life to your notebook.

EUROPEAN HI-FI ACCESSORY 2013-2014**AudioQuest Carbon USB cable**

Every seasoned enthusiast knows that different interconnect and loudspeaker cables will impact on the sound of a hi-fi system, but the same is also true of digital cables. The rise in popularity of USB DACs has been met by a similar cloudburst of proprietary USB cables, and AudioQuest is right at the forefront of this new technology. Carbon USB, named after the woven carbon fibre-like jacket that clothes this fashionable cable, lies midway through its five-strong range. It employs superior silver-plated solid copper conductors and adheres exactly to the USB specification, offering excellent compatibility and helping to deliver a pristine sound with all good-quality USB DACs. If you want to hear your system at its best, then trade-up from your 'giveaway' USB cable.



EUROPEAN PHOTO-VIDEO CAMERA 2013-2014**Panasonic LUMIX DMC-GH3**

The Panasonic LUMIX DMC-GH3 offers the best video quality of any combined still and movie camera in this price segment – and actually in some higher segments as well. It offers full manual as well as completely automatic video recording, making it ideal for in-the-field shooting as well as more formal situations. It's also a pretty handy stills camera with a full range of controls, making it an impressively flexible package. The Panasonic LUMIX DMC-GH3 is very popular with videographers partly because it is a very lightweight and rugged, weather-resistant camera that's serviced by a great selection of high-quality lenses.

**EUROPEAN PHOTO-VIDEO ACCESSORY 2013-2014****Manfrotto MVH500AH**

The Manfrotto MVH500AH is a lightweight and compact tripod head with a wide sliding plate that is suitable for use with big DSLR telephoto lenses and professional quality video cameras. It ensures smooth adjustments, fine controls and sharp pictures. As it can be mounted on standard photo tripods the MVH500AH is an ideal accessory for photo enthusiasts who want to start exploring the video functions of their cameras. The head achieves its smooth motion using professional fluid cartridges on both pan and tilt axes, and a locking system makes it quick and simple to lift the camera out of the head. The MVH500AH is able to support equipment of up to 5kg and an Easy Link 3/8" connector also allows an external monitor or other accessories to be fitted directly to the head.

EUROPEAN ACTION CAM 2013-2014**GoPro HERO3 Black Edition**

The GoPro HERO3 Black Edition is the most sophisticated action cam around. Robust, lightweight and compact, it's an ideal partner for outdoor enthusiasts, from surfers and cyclists to deep-sea divers. Acting as both a camcorder and a stills camera, the GoPro gives users total flexibility over what they shoot – modes include slow-motion, full HD and low-frame-rate 4K/Ultra HD. Accessories in the Black Edition set include a Wi-Fi remote, waterproof housing and adhesive mounts and pivots, so it can be used in many different environments. Pairing with smartphones and tablets lets you monitor and control what you're filming. Essentially, whatever you want to do, this smallscale cam can do it...





EUROPEAN GREEN PHONE 2013-2014

Samsung GALAXY S4

With its GALAXY S4, Samsung has shown that it's possible to produce a large-screen smartphone with minimal environmental burden. The S4 outperforms the competition through its limited use of precious metals and toxic materials. Samsung's flagship has particularly low power consumption, which is not only positive for the environment but is also convenient for the user. EISA's Green Jury is pleased to see that the S4 has a removable battery – going against the recent trend of using embedded batteries.

And the rest of the EISA Awards from the Photo, In-Car Electronics and Mobile Panels

Photo Panel

EUROPEAN CAMERA 2013-2014

Nikon D7100

EUROPEAN ADVANCED CAMERA
2013-2014

Sony Alpha SLT-A99

EUROPEAN SLR CAMERA 2013-2014
Canon EOS 100D

EUROPEAN ADVANCED SLR CAMERA
2013-2014

Canon EOS 6D

EUROPEAN COMPACT SYSTEM CAMERA
2013-2014

Samsung NX300

EUROPEAN COMPACT CAMERA
2013-2014

Sony Cyber-shot DSC-HX50/HX50V

EUROPEAN ADVANCED COMPACT
CAMERA 2013-2014
Fujifilm X100S

EUROPEAN TRAVEL CAMERA 2013-2014
Olympus TOUGH TG-2

EUROPEAN LENS 2013-2014
**Tamron SP 90mm F2.8 Di VC USD
Macro 1:1**

EUROPEAN PROFESSIONAL LENS
2013-2014
**Canon EF 200-400mm F4L IS USM
Extender 1.4x**

EUROPEAN ZOOM LENS 2013-2014
Tamron SP 70-200mm F2.8 Di VC USD

EUROPEAN COMPACT SYSTEM LENS
2013-2014

ZEISS Touit 2.8/12

EUROPEAN COMPACT SYSTEM ZOOM
LENS 2013-2014

**Panasonic LUMIX G Vario 14-140mm
F3.5-5.6**

EUROPEAN PHOTO INNOVATION
2013-2014

Samsung GALAXY NX

EUROPEAN PHOTO SOFTWARE
2013-2014

DxO Optics Pro 8

In-Car Electronics Panel

EUROPEAN IN-CAR HEAD UNIT
2013-2014

Kenwood DNN9230DAB

EUROPEAN IN-CAR NAVI-MEDIA SYSTEM
2013-2014

Parrot ASTEROID Tablet

EUROPEAN IN-CAR AMPLIFIER 2013-2014
Hertz HCP 5D

EUROPEAN IN-CAR SPEAKER SYSTEM
2013-2014
Focal PS 165FX

EUROPEAN IN-CAR SUBWOOFER
2013-2014
GLADEN ZERO 12 PRO

EUROPEAN IN-CAR STREAMING
SOLUTION 2013-2014

MOSCONI DSP_AMAS

EUROPEAN IN-CAR INTEGRATION
2013-2014

Focal DSA 500RT

EUROPEAN IN-CAR HIGH-END
COMPONENT 2013-2014

Ground Zero GZPA Reference 2T

Mobile Panel

EUROPEAN MOBILE HEADPHONE
2013-2014

JVC HA-FXZ200

EUROPEAN MOBILE AUDIO SYSTEM
2013-2014

Harman Kardon Onyx

EUROPEAN TABLET 2013-2014
Sony Xperia Tablet Z

EUROPEAN ADVANCED SMARTPHONE
2013-2014

HTC One

EUROPEAN CONSUMER SMARTPHONE
2013-2014

Huawei Ascend P6

EUROPEAN SOCIAL MEDIA PHONE
2013-2014

Samsung GALAXY S4 mini

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POINT OF VIEW

With TV series dominating the growing world of video-on-demand, **Richard Stevenson** worries that his regular cosplay movie nights will become a thing of the past

TELEVISION IS THE new movie. Or rather: TV shows are the new media entertainment of choice when it comes to streaming video. Recent figures from survey-meister GfK show that content created for broadcast TV enjoys up to four times as many downloads as cinematic movies. In fact, GfK in the United States suggests that, across the subscription video-on-demand (SVOD) market, TV series account for 81 per cent of downloaded content against just 19 per cent for films.

I find this predilection for TV series rather alarming. Market forces dictate content, so as we move from linear broadcast viewing to a VOD-centric model, content producers, directors, writers and investors will be ever more focused on TV series-style programming rather than movies. After all, **TV series can engage the audience over a longer period, have multi-season revenues and the odd duff episode can be buried.** Not so a movie that stands or falls on its first-week reviews. Where would you invest your money?

Add to this the fact that VOD is growing rapidly while cinema-going has been static for a while. UK cinemas see between 150million and 170million bums on seats each year and that hasn't changed for nearly a decade. On the other hand, 25million episodes from *Downton Abbey's* third series were downloaded in the US in just seven weeks.

TV: the next generation

I therefore worry that the self-contained story experience that is a movie may be on the wane. At the same time, I have been captivated by a few series myself, including the likes of *Homeland*, *Mad Men* and the late, lamented *Star Trek: Enterprise*. Sadly Captain John Archer (no, not our TV reviewer)

and the ...*Enterprise* plot were somewhat too subtle and clever for the US TV networks, and it was canned in 2005. I suspect that had it launched now, in our growing VOD-centric entertainment world to a more sophisticated audience, rather than in 2001, its longevity would have been much, much greater.

In fact many of today's TV series have just as good effects, actors and budgets as Hollywood's finest movies and they create something of a saga of familiar characters across each season. So in essence we are getting a series of great, short, movies where you are already familiar with the scenario and key characters at the beginning of each episode. This allows the plot to unwind and you can build greater empathy with the characters than is possible with a simple 120- or 150-minute a movie.

This is okay if that is what you want. But do you? The art of a good film is in encapsulating the world and its characters, the storyline and the tension, the excitement and the climax, in a single body of work for immediate and complete digestion. It does not allow for a sloppy plot, poor acting or less-than-believable dialogue – traps into which even the best TV series sometimes fall. *Lost's* shaggy dog story went on for ever, and many episodes were thin and pointless. Most episodes, thinking about it. Yet that has not stopped it from regularly appearing in the top 20 of SVOD downloads in the US. How many first-class movies could have been made with *Lost's* total six-year budget, I wonder?

For me, movies remain where my heart is and a night in with *Star Trek: Into Darkness* wins hands down over any TV series – particularly if I can wear my yellow Star Fleet tunic and get the wife to dress as an Orion Slave Girl. But am I in a minority? ■

Are you watching more TV programmes than ever before? Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com

Richard Stevenson's cinematic wardrobe also includes a Shrek costume, Darth Vader outfit and much-loved PVC Catwoman suit





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